

The Last Cherry Blossom

Jota Te

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Summary

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Description:

Twenty years after Kuja's downfall, a now middle-aged Freya Crescent is driven into exile by her homeland's new ruler. Lost, broken, but not defeated, the once proud dragoon sets out to unravel a conspiracy that threatens to plunge the Mist Continent into war once again - WIP

1. Prologue

The Last Cherry Blossom

In the end, the world didn't change at all.

Twenty years have passed since the day I thought that we Gaians had finally managed to set our differences aside, and put war and strife behind us. We allied against a threat so dire that the existence of life itself was at stake, and we won. How could we possibly hurt each other again after such a feat?

I was wrong.

When I was young, I used to think war was about honorable fighters meeting on the battlefield to protect what they held dear. Then, after we Burmecians were almost wiped out entirely, my perspective on it shifted completely. It wasn't about honor, love, kingdoms or causes. It was about the lust for power of a select few.

We've learned nothing.

After so much destruction, so much bloodshed, we tried to rebuild our lives despite the smoking pile of rubble and corpses that our homeland had become.

So much death.

With the help of Lindblum and Alexandria, Burmecia rose shakily to her feet once again. In the meanwhile, they called me a hero. Savior of the world. The very incarnation of everything a Burmecian should be. A symbol of hope. They did it partially out of gratitude, but mostly to give people the strength they needed to carry on after all that happened. Life became more complicated as a result of my new status as a cultural icon, but if it allowed me to keep serving my nation, I was ready to bear the burden with a smile on my face.

To serve my nation...

Despite the good will of Queen Garnet and Regent Cid, the situation we faced not only as a civilization but as a species was desperate. There were so few survivors of Queen Brahne's genocidal campaign against our people that extinction became a very real possibility. It was only a matter of time before we found ourselves cornered on the edge of the abyss, and it was that what ultimately set in

motion the chain of events that lead to this very moment...

2. Scorched Hands

March 24th, 1820, Kingdom of Alexandria.

“What..? Where..?”

She felt the world spinning around her.

“Auntie Freya? Auntie Freya! Are you awake?”

Her mind ground to a halt.

“Huh..? Little Tot? What... are you doing here?”

“Mom! Dad! Auntie Freya is awake!”

She could hear a child’s voice echoing across the hallway as he ran away to find his parents.

“*Am I dreaming?*” the dragoon wondered. She slowly sat up to give the room she was in a closer look. It was undoubtedly one of the main guest chambers of the royal palace of Alexandria. She used to sleep in one of those whenever she came to visit her old comrades and, she had to admit, was particularly fond of the view they had.

“Hey, *rat-face*...” greeted her a familiar voice, raspier than it used to be but still as playful and insolent. Freya didn’t even turn her head, knowing exactly who had just insulted her.

“Rat-face...”, she muttered with a nostalgic smile, “When I get out of this bed, I’m gonna kick your butt, monkey-tail.”

Zidane Tribal, king consort of Alexandria stepped into the room with a big, goofy grin on his face. Time had been kind to him, the Burmecian noted, for he had become even more handsome than he was as a teenager. Unexpectedly, maturity suited him really well.

“It’s been far too long, Freya. We’ve missed you a lot around here...” he said, leaving the door half-closed.

“I’m sorry...” she replied, offering her old friend a sad smile “Life in Burmecia has been... quite *rough* lately, to put it lightly.”

The Genome’s expression became unusually somber, and the knight knew exactly where was the conversation inevitably headed towards.

“Quite rough, you say..? Wanna talk about it?”

“Zidane... I...” she stammered. She didn’t know how to tell him that his old friend, Puck, had recently been...

After way too many years of holding back the tears, the battle-hardened dragoon finally snapped and started crying silently, hiding her shame with her long, silver hair. Zidane felt a lump in his throat. He hadn’t seen her like that since the day she found out that her lost love did not remember her anymore.

“Dad... why is Auntie Freya crying?” Little Tot asked, shyly peeking into the room.

“I think she needs a big hug from her favorite nephew,” the king answered with a tender smile. Freya hiccuped and chuckled, wiping her eyes with her wrist.

“Come here, little one...” she said, extending her arms. The young boy immediately glomped her and the three of them had a good laugh.

“Tot, Aunt Freya and I need to discuss a couple things. *Adult things*. You know, the boring ones? So, would you please go play outside so we can talk for a moment?” the Genome said, gently patting his son on the shoulder.

“Will Auntie be alright?” the child asked, genuinely concerned. The Burmecian kissed him softly on the forehead and helped him back to the ground.

“Don’t worry about me, Tot... I’m an invincible dragon knight, remember?” she said, winking at him, “Now go, have fun, it’s a beautiful day out there.”

With a radiant smile, he waved her goodbye and ran away, happy to have helped.

“I never imagined that a lecherous knucklehead like you could be such a good father,” Freya commented with a smirk.

“Let’s just say that I have a big soft spot for that little guy. Kind of reminds me of...”

“... I know.” the dragoon said, “I didn’t want to bring that up, but his demeanor is oddly reminiscent of Vivi’s...”

Both friends stayed silent for a while, not knowing what to say.

“Please, tell me I didn’t kill any innocents...” Freya broke the ice, closing her eyes.

Zidane angled a worried look at the Burmecian. She was gripping the bed sheets, bracing for the inevitable.

“Truth is... we don’t know yet. Collateral damage was... *big*. We paid for the material losses, obviously, but... people got caught in the crossfire, Freya,” the Genome replied.

“How many..?” the knight’s broken voice made Zidane flinch, but he decided that it was best to be honest.

“Three. Their wounds are being tended to by our best white mages. They said most of them will recover quickly, but there’s this little girl...”

“No... please... *not a child...*” the dragoon grabbed her head in desperation. “Where is she? I must go see if there is something I can do to help!”

“You will stay here for a while,” the king ordered, leaving her no room for argument. “You went into Trance for the first time in decades, Freya. Your body won’t be able to handle the walk to the hospital.”

“But... I need to know...”

“No. Whatever happens, *we’ll* tell you. I really hate to say this, but you killed six people and wounded another three in Alexandrian territory in broad daylight. I understand why you did it, and rest assured Garnet and I will protect you, but we need you to stay put until things cool down a bit, okay?” Zidane replied in a dead serious tone.

Freya nodded silently, then she lowered her head and looked at her hands: part of their fur had been burned away by the monstrous energy release.

“*Guess I wasn’t dreaming after all...*” she thought.

Author’s note:

Hi and welcome back to Gaia, dear reader!

*The Prologue has been revised by **Myshu**. I’d like to use this space to properly thank her for all her support =)*

*I’d also like to thank **Janet K. Wallace** for her beautiful allusive **artwork**. You can see it here: **i -dot— vgy -dot— me/EX1Rvl -dot— jpg** (replace each **-dot—** for **.** and leave no spaces).*

Have fun!

3. A House Divided

If there was one thing Freya used to treasure in her youth was silence. It was for her a big part of the charm of being a lone wanderer. She was particularly fond of the almost mystical peace of mind that hitting the open roads gave her. Maybe all those beautiful memories were what made her own personal hell so ironic.

Sitting at an old wooden table, two former lovers shared a frugal meal. Long ago had their flame fizzled out, and all that was left was a dreadful, agonizing silence that only the rain hitting the windows dared interrupt.

A quiet, repetitive sound called their attention.

“We should fix that leak...” Sir Fratley said, with the most exhausted tone one could imagine.

Freya reluctantly got up, her chair scraping the floor. Her husband winced in annoyance, but said nothing.

“Where are you going?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“I’m going to town, we’ve been out of nails for a week,” she answered dryly, putting on an old, tattered raincoat.

“You’re just gonna drink yourself into oblivion, aren’t you?” he shot at her, every word coated in poison.

“What if I am? You couldn’t care less...” she retorted, without even turning back to face him.

“Why do you keep running, Freya? *Why can’t you accept the truth?!*” Fratley had at that point dropped all pretense of civility and started furiously shouting at his wife.

“The truth, Fratley?!” She turned back, eyes ablaze. *“Have you completely forgotten everything we ever stood for?! Have Ulrich’s lies burrowed so deep into your heart that you can no longer tell friend from foe?!”*

“... Ulrich will be king, whether you like it or not,” he growled. “He will restore our lost pride and lead us into a new age of prosperity...”

“He will drive us into servitude, *you stubborn, ignorant fool!*” Freya retorted, raising her voice, “Can’t you see he’s a pawn of Treno’s nobility? *Where do you think his funds keep coming from?!*”

“At least he’s doing something about the state of the ruin we call home!” Fratley replied, folding his arms. “I’ve had enough of Puck’s pathetic dependence on Alexandrian charity. Queen Garnet doesn’t give a *damn* about us! She’s only feigning generosity to keep us starved and under control!”

Freya crossed the room in three strides and stopped inches from her husband’s face with the most furious expression he had ever seen.

“Speak ill of Garnet in front of me again and I will pummel you into the ground...” she hissed, fists balled up and ready to deliver on her threat. Fratley gasped and then glared at her, deeply hurt: he couldn’t believe what he had just heard.

“*Go to hell, Crescent...*” he bitterly answered.

“I’m already there...” she shot back and turned to leave.

“Hope you choke on your godsdamn ale, *you traitorous bitch!*” he finally exploded, two decades of hunger and humiliation fueling his blind rage. He immediately covered his mouth with his hands, terrified of his own outburst.

“*Darling..?*” He mumbled, staring into his wife’s eyes. Distant lightning illuminated her devastated

expression for a second and Fratley realized that they had just stepped past the point of no return.

“*Gods... what have I done..?!*” he croaked, “Freya! Freya, please! I’m so..!”

Freya’s lower lip started trembling as she slammed the door behind her. The cold rain hit her like a hammer as she walked down the dark streets of Burmecia.

Three soft knocks on the door brought Freya back to reality. She realized that she had been absentmindedly fidgeting with her worn-out wedding bangle while she was lost in her memories.

“Freya, darling, are you awake?” a familiar voice asked from the hallway.

“Garnet? Is that you?” the bedridden Burmecian answered, taken by surprise.

“Yes! May I come in?”

“Please, do!”

The queen of Alexandria cautiously entered the room. Freya’s eyes widened when she realized that

her old friend had brought her food and water in a silver tray.

“I-I don’t mean to be ungrateful, Garnet, but... won’t there be any problems if anyone sees you doing this?” the dragon knight asked.

“I don’t care at all,” the summoner answered. Freya smiled, realizing that good old Dagger was still in there.

“Zidane told me... about the consequences of my actions,” the Burmecian said as the summoner set the tray down on a small side table, “What I did is unforgivable... I don’t deserve your hospitality.”

Garnet suddenly stopped what she was doing.

“... I’m going to get really angry if you don’t stop talking nonsense, Freya.” she said with an increasingly broken voice.

“Garnet... I...”

“They should have helped you...” the queen stated, her eyes starting to well up. *“How could they stand idly by, watching them hurt you?! You! Whom they all owe their lives to! People make me sick lately...”*

“... There were too many of them, and they were well armed. Intervening would have been suicidal.” the dragoon rationalized.

“That never prevented us from doing the right thing, didn’t it?” Garnet said, sitting beside her old friend, “Someone should have done something. *Anything*. I’m deeply ashamed about what happened...”

“Why? It wasn’t your fault. I shouldn’t have been there in the first place,” Freya replied, her voice tinged with regret, “Stopping at that tavern instead of coming here immediately was a grave mistake.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the summoner replied, disappointed in herself. “Alexandria has always prided itself on being a place where women can come and go freely. It’s my responsibility as a queen to ensure that.”

“*Oh... so that’s what Zidane meant when he said that he understood what happened...*” Freya thought. “Garnet, um... they didn’t attack me out of... *misogyny*,” she stammered, mustering the courage to tell her old friend that she had become an exile and a fugitive.

“What do you mean?”

“They tried to murder me because they think I’m a traitor... both to my kingdom and to my entire race.” the Burmecian said, letting out a disheartened sigh.

“Huh..? How could they possibly believe that?!” Garnet asked, perplexed.

“... Prince Puck is dead, Garnet... and I tried, and failed, to kill the man who orchestrated his demise,” Freya explained, lowering her eyes in shame. “... I’m sorry”

The summoner gasped and covered her mouth in horror. She stared at her friend in utter shock for a moment, unable to form a coherent thought.

“... Who did it?” she finally asked, trembling with rage.

“Chancellor Ulrich Fritjofsson,” Freya replied, clenching her fists at the mere mention of his name. “... He will soon be appointed as Regent of Burmecia.”

Garnet stood up without saying a word.

“... You are safe now. We will make sure of that,” the sovereign declared after a brief moment of contemplation. She then turned around, and smiled

gently at her old friend, “I can’t compensate you enough for the horrors you have suffered, but you have my word: I’ll do everything in my power to help you from now on.”

“Thank you, Garnet... no words can express my gratitude.” the Burmecian said, respectfully nodding her head.

“You should try to eat a little and rest yourself.” the queen suggested, walking towards the door. “I’ll come by later to check on you, okay?”

Having said that, she left the room, leaving Freya alone with her thoughts again.

4. Sole Survivor

“You’re kidding. Please, tell me that you’re kidding, Dag...”

Garnet lowered her eyes in response. Zidane took a deep breath, trying not to lose control.

“He killed Puck... he almost did Freya in too... I’ll destroy that piece of..!”

A violent surge of magic started crackling and arcing around him as his voice got more and more distorted. Garnet immediately took a step back when the phenomenon started intensely illuminating the royal chamber.

“Zid... you’re manifesting the aura!”

“I... I’m sorry, honey... just... give me a second...” the genome said, closing his eyes to focus on controlling himself. After a short inner struggle, he managed to rein in his power.

“Are you okay, darling?” the queen asked, carefully approaching him again.

“No... I’m not okay knowing that this scumbag chancellor got away with murdering a friend!” Zidane growled, trembling with rage, “I knew the very moment he showed up that he would become a royal pain in the ass. I just didn’t imagine he would resort to regicide to usurp the throne.”

“I know, Zid.. I know... but we need to stay calm. Ulrich has not officially announced Puck’s death, so it’s not yet the time to make our move. If we rush to act we may end up triggering a war...” Garnet answered, tenderly caressing his cheek to help him cool down.

“... You have no idea how powerless I feel right now...” the genome sighed, finally lowering his head in defeat and embracing his wife. Garnet closed her eyes and held him lovingly.

“Me too, darling... and he will pay for his atrocities in due time, but now we must gather all the information we can and be extremely careful,” Garnet said, looking her husband in the eyes, “It may be too late for a peaceful resolution, but I want to try. The Burmecian people has already suffered too much at the hands of Alexandria.”

Zidane smiled at her as he brushed her hair aside.

“Damn, Dag... you’re so beautiful when you care about everyone.”

Garnet chuckled.

“What can I say? A certain lovable rogue must have rubbed off on me,” she answered, radiant.

“Nah, that’s all you. That’s why I love you,” he answered before warmly kissing her.

Three knocks on the door interrupted the couple mid-kiss.

“Your Majesties, I have urgent news for you!” exclaimed Beatrix from the outside.

“Please, come in!” Garnet ordered, letting go of Zidane.

Without losing a second, the armor-clad legendary paladin of Alexandria entered the room.

“We got him,” she said.

Below the majestic white and gold of the Alexandrian castle, lied its dark dungeon made of cold steel and stone. Zidane and Garnet knew the place far too well, having been subjected to the

atrocities that it used to house in the past. Nowadays it was a mostly unused museum relic that reminded them about the dark nature of power every time they visited it.

Beatrix, torch in hand, led both monarchs through the darkness with military cadence. She stopped in front of a heavy wooden door guarded by a soldier.

“Open the door, Stendhal,” she ordered. The warden immediately obeyed and the trio entered the cell.

“There you have him. The sole survivor of the alleyway massacre,” the general said.

Blindfolded and chained, a badly battered burmecian was lying on the floor. He breathed with difficulty and his white fur was stained in many places with his own blood.

“Tell me you didn’t torture him, Beatrix,” Garnet said, dryly.

“Not at all, ma’am. I’ve actually saved his life,” Beatrix answered.

“How so?”

“He was heavily wounded by shrapnel. It’s a miracle he managed to survive running away like he

did.”

“How did you find him?” Zidane inquired.

“The blood trail he left behind made him easy to track. His inhuman jumping prowess only delayed the inevitable.”

“Jumping prowess? You mean this guy is a dragoon?” the king asked, bewildered.

“Next to warriors like Crescent he’s more like a whelp,” the general scornfully said, looking at the would-be assassin. “But yes, he’s undoubtedly a dragon magic user.”

“Has he said anything useful?” Garnet intervened.

“No. He’s been unconscious since we captured him, but worry not, ma’am: he will sing like a canary.”

“Remember: no torture. We don’t want to give the burmecian people any more reasons to abhor us. Besides, his status as a professional soldier will come in handy as leverage against his master.”

“A wise decision, indeed,” the swordswoman commented “I’ll keep you informed about the results of the interrogation.”

“Thanks, Beatrix. You have done an excellent job,” the queen answered, giving the burmecian a last look before leaving the dungeon.

5. The Dragonslayer (Part One)

Standing in the middle of a barren field, Freya stared indifferently at the incoming wall of destruction that loomed on the horizon.

“My love! My love, where are you?”

Her husband was calling for her in the distance, but she didn’t answer.

A withered wild flower, jutting out of small dust mound, drew her attention. It danced madly, agitated by the furious gusts of wind that heralded the tempest. She kneeled and looked at it with glazed eyes.

“You and I are the same, aren’t we?” she whispered to it and then deliriously chuckled at the comparison.

“Freya..? *What are you doing down there?!*” Fratley yelled when he spotted his wife kneeling on the dead crop field with the massive sandstorm rapidly advancing towards her. He covered his snout

with a piece of cloth and rushed downhill at full speed, “Come back, darling! It’s too dangerous!”

Freya feebly tried to stand up, but lost her footing and fell backwards, wildly cackling the whole time.

“Father Berlioz, please give me the strength to reach her in time!” Fratley prayed and then he started using his dragon magic to move even faster. He felt like his skin was being ripped apart by the burning winds but he endured it and finally managed to reunite with his wife.

“Isn’t it hilarious, darling?!” Freya yelled, her voice almost drowned by the deafening roar of the storm.

“What are you talking about?!” Fratley cried as he lifted her and started carrying her back to their house, “Cover your face, my love! This is gonna get rough!”

“Our lives, our kingdom, they are nothing but a big, twisted joke!” she raved, gripping her husband’s vest, *“Why aren’t you laughing, my love? Don’t you find it funny..?”*

Fratley looked at her, disturbed by her delirious rant, then he glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the rolling cloud hit him in the back like a

sledgehammer. He screamed in terror as the storm sent them both tumbling downhill. Despite the fall bloodying her, Freya was beyond feeling anything by that point, the world slowly fading away around her. The last thing she saw before darkness engulfed her was her husband desperately crawling towards her.

“I... love you, Fratley...” she muttered before passing out.

Freya opened her eyes, not knowing where she was. The image of Sir Fratley reaching for her was burned in her mind and for a moment she thought she was in Burmecia and that he would come to check on her at any moment. Instead, the clear sky of Alexandria welcomed her back to the royal palace. She basked in the morning light, oddly proud of having slept the whole night through for the first time in months.

Her stomach growled. Amused by the weird sound it made, she decided to look around for any leftovers of what Garnet had brought her to eat. Disappointingly, someone had taken away the silver plate while she was sleeping.

“I wonder...” the burmecian thought, wanting to see if she could stand up again. Very carefully, she put her feet on the ground. Her calves immediately started trembling when she attempted to support her weight on them, but she ignored the pain and kept trying until she finally managed to stay upright.

“Well done, legs!” she thought, proudly smiling, *“Now let’s try walking a little...”*

She slowly took a step, then another, then another. She relished her restored ability to move on her own. She felt invincible, Gaia’s ultimate survivor!

Knock, knock.

“Bad timing, Freya...”, she thought, freezing up, *“Please, wait a second!”*

“Is everything alright?” Zidane asked, his voice muffled by the wooden door.

“Oh gods, not him!” Freya thought. The idea of being seen hobbling around in her undergarments by *Zidane* filled her with dread: the stars would die out before he stopped making fun of her for that.

“Yes! Just give me a moment!”

“Okay, take your time!” the genome answered. He waited patiently in the hallway until he heard a loud thump followed by a comically high-pitched yelp and a curse in an unknown burmecian dialect and decided he had to find out what was going on inside.

“Freya, are you..? Oh! *OH!* I’m sorry! *I’m so sorry!*” the king apologized, immediately looking away.

“*Gosh darn it*, monkey-tail! I just told you to give me a second!” the burmecian angrily shouted as she pathetically dragged herself towards the bed.

“Did you just say *gosh darn it?*” Zidane asked, immediately bursting into laughter.

“Oh, shut up you... *you..!*” the dragoon shot back. She then realized that she couldn’t get up on her own. “*Ugh, wonderful...*” she thought.

“Seriously now, do you need a hand?” The genome asked her, still facing the hallway.

“... yes, please,” she sighed.

The king approached the downed burmecian and gently helped her stand up.

“There you are, good as new!” he said with a grin. The dragoon stared at the genome for a while as if expecting something. “What? Do I have something on my face?” Zidane inquired.

“That’s it? No crude remarks? No childish jests?” she asked him, incredulous.

“Nope. People grow up, you know?” the king answered, amused by her reaction.

“I know, I... just have a hard time believing how much you’ve changed...” she answered, warmly smiling at him.

“Pfft... flatterer”

“You’re one to talk.”

“I was going to ask you what you wanted for breakfast, but now that you’re up you can join us if you feel like it. We’re having tea in the garden!”

“*Oh*, that would be *lo...*” Freya enthusiastically answered before realizing something, “Hold on a second... you, Zidane Tribal, are having *tea. In the garden.*”

“When you live among royalty you either adapt to this kind of stuff or you get kicked out,” he replied as he fetched the crutch he had

commissioned for her from the corridor, “Now get dressed and come before I leave your furry ass to starve for mocking me.”

“... I can’t believe I got my hopes up about your newfound maturity...” she retorted with a frown, “Alright, I’ll go, just don’t walk too fast, please.”

The sheer size and beauty of the royal palace of Alexandria never ceased to amaze Freya, but she had a definite favorite place in the castle: the garden. Sporting a wide variety of native and foreign flora carefully arranged in thematic sections, it was a masterpiece, famed across the entire globe. It was Zidane who had had the idea of making a big part of it public, to let families of any status enjoy their free time in Alexandria’s little slice of paradise. For things like this, he was loathed by the conservative nobility, deeply loved by the common people and grudgingly respected by those who, despite disagreeing with his ideas, saw how effective he was at maintaining social peace.

After a short trip, the genome king and the dragoon reached the kiosk where Garnet and Tot awaited while enjoying tea and biscuits. When the

queen saw Freya limping towards the structure she immediately rose to her feet to go help her, but was stopped by Steiner, who was performing guard duty and decided to do it himself.

“Lady Freya!” he boomed as he approached her, “Please, let me assist you as it seems that our king has forgotten everything about chivalry or manners in general.”

“Hey! I gave her a crutch!” Zidane shot back. Freya chuckled.

“Oh, hello Steiner! Don’t worry about me, I can walk just fiiiiiiii-!”

Before she could finish her sentence, the massive knight effortlessly picked her up like a child and started carrying her back to the kiosk, his armor loudly clanging with every step. Zidane laughed his head off at the sight and Garnet facepalmed, trying not to do the same.

“Steiner, please put her down...” the queen ordered in an exasperated tone when the duo arrived at the structure.

“As you wish, ma’am,” he answered and gently put Freya on the ground. The dragoon dusted herself

off and bowed to Garnet. “Your Majesty...” she saluted, trying to regain her composure.

“Aunt Freya! You’re up!” Tot exclaimed, delighted to see her again.

“Hello there, little one!” she said with a big smile. The kid promptly glomped her with a little too much energy, almost making her fall on her backside.

“Tot! Be gentle with your aunt! She’s barely recovered from her injuries!” his mother said, making the boy release her at once, “I’m glad to see you up again, Freya. Please, sit down and help yourself to whatever you want.”

“Thank you, Garnet,” the burmecian politely answered as she sat on a chair and started pouring tea on a porcelain cup.

“Mind if I join in?” Zidane asked, taking his place alongside Garnet and pecking her on the lips. This prompted both Steiner and Tot to cover their eyes in embarrassment. Freya lowered her eyes with a melancholic half-smile.

“We have excellent news for you!” Garnet exclaimed, clapping her hands in excitement, “We have been informed this morning that everyone in

the hospital is officially out of danger and will fully recover soon! Isn't that wonderful?"

"Is that true? What about the badly hurt child? *Will she recover too?*" the burmecian blurted out, almost spilling her tea.

"Absolutely. Here, have a look at this," Garnet answered, extending her a handwritten report signed by the last person Freya expected.

"Eiko, huh?" the dragoon commented, this time with a relieved smile, "That girl can truly work miracles."

"When she caught wind of what happened, she traveled all the way from Lindblum to personally take the case in her hands," Zidane added, munching on a biscuit. "Sadly, she had urgent stuff to attend to. Would have liked having her over for dinner at least. She sends you her regards, by the way."

"She never changes, eh?" the dragoon commented. "I wish I had something on me to gift her..."

Garnet suddenly looked at Zidane and nodded her head. The genome nodded back and got up.

“Hey Tot! Wanna play tag? I’m up for a rematch!” he said.

“Yay! Let’s go, dad!” the boy joyfully exclaimed as he started chasing after his father “See you later mom! Auntie!”

“Be careful, sweetie!” Garnet shouted and then looked at Steiner. The Pluto Knight approached the table.

“Lady Freya, we have captured a survivor,” he said.

“Excuse me?” the burmecian said, slowly putting her teacup on the table.

“One of the burmecians that attacked you. He tried to run away but Beatrix’s unit got him,” the burly warrior explained. “He’s still unconscious, but when he wakes up, Bea will personally interrogate him.”

Freya stared at Steiner blankly, horrified by the idea of being in a cell alone with the merciless general.

“He is a dragoon, Freya,” Garnet added, her expression becoming a deep frown, “Under any other circumstances his attempt on your life would

have constituted grounds for a declaration of war, but, as I have no interest in an armed conflict with Burmecia, I need you to help me understand Ulrich's goals in order to peacefully stop him."

Freya sighed. She silently took the porcelain teapot and began pouring what was left of its contents in her teacup. Garnet and Steiner held their breath as she stared into the dark beverage.

"My first memory of him is a also a very painful one," she said as she added a spoonful of honey to her drink, "We met five years ago, during the Great Burmecian Drought. The disappearance of the eternal rain that ensued Kuja's defeat had caused a rapid desertification of the kingdom. It was a matter of time before a particularly windy season turned all that desiccated soil into an unending chain of sandstorms."

"I remember that. So many lives were lost during those years..." Garnet sighed.

"I never told you, but... the drought almost claimed mine too," Freya said, pausing to look the queen of Alexandria in the eyes.

"What..?" Garnet muttered, unable to process what her friend had just revealed to her. Steiner

paled, “Lady Freya...” he mumbled.

“The extreme shortage of water led to the appearance of a highly contagious disease...” the dragoon continued explaining.

“The Blight...” Garnet remembered, her eyes wide open, “You got infected too..?”

“Yes...”

“Why didn’t you tell me?! I would have helped!” the queen exclaimed, confused and hurt.

“I was... too tired, Garnet...” Freya answered in a broken voice. “I’m sorry...”

Garnet took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. Her eyes started welling up, so she wiped them with the back of her hand.

“How did you survive without proper treatment?” she asked.

“I did get treated... by none other than Ulrich himself.”

6. The Dragonslayer (Part Two)

Fratley opened his eyes. He was covered in sand and bruises, but he was still alive. The storm had passed, but he knew full well that it could come back in short order, so they didn't have time to lose.

“Freya? My love, can you hear me?”

He had been shielding her with his body, so he propped himself up to check on her. “Ack..!” he grunted, realizing that his right leg was broken. Freya lied still beneath him, her facial fur caked with blood and dirt.

“Oh, no...” he muttered as he lifted her hair to reveal a large gash on her forehead. He immediately put an ear close to her snout and heaved a sigh of relief when he heard her faint but steady respiration. He then started praying, focusing all the power he had left into his fist.

“*Mother Reis, hear my plea in this time of need...*” he whispered, a greenish glow radiating from his hand.

When he felt the spell was ready, he released it, wreathing them both in a healing magical aura. He then collapsed to the ground, drained by the conjuration.

The scorching sun of the desert shined, merciless, above them. After catching his breath, the knight checked Freya's wound. The cut had stopped bleeding and looked much better, but the ensuing infection would be deadly if she didn't get it treated soon. He tried to stand up, but the spell had only partially healed his leg. He fell sideways, screaming in pain.

"Why?! Why is this happening?!" he raged, pounding the sand with his fist, *"Help! Can anyone hear me?! HEEELP!"*

But nobody answered.

Never before had Sir Fratley felt *this* powerless. Not even witnessing the obliteration of Cleyra could compare to seeing the love of his life lying motionless next to him, like a broken doll buried in the sand.

He suddenly had an idea.

The dragoon quickly looked around. *"Aha!"* he thought when he spotted a nearby downed branch.

He crawled towards it as fast as he could and grabbed it with his right hand. “*Father Berlioz, give me strength!*” he prayed. His left hand started glowing purple and he struck the branch twice with its edge, cleanly slicing it into two serviceable sticks. He quickly splinted his damaged limb and crawled back to where his wife was.

“We will get out of this, my love... I promise!” the dragoon whispered in her ear. He then tried screaming for help, but once again only the wind answered. “*We will have to take our chances then...*”.

Sir Fratley closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He used his desire to save Freya as an anchor point to gather every last drop of his remaining spiritual force. A mystical surge enveloped him in blinding purple light, filling him with raw power. “*Father Berlioz, give me strength!*” the knight roared as he rose to his feet, using his momentum to also lift Freya up. He screamed in agony, the invigorating spell having done nothing to anesthetize his mangled leg, but he knew he had to jump before it wore off and he fell unconscious. He took off, the enormity of his leap reflecting his many decades of experience as a dragoon. His target was a nearby

route that merchants frequently used to enter Burmecia from the south.

“I see someone! We are saved!” the knight enthusiastically exclaimed when he spotted a lone traveler on a chocobo near his intended landing site. The couple started plummeting due to Fratley struggling to concentrate because of the pain, but seconds before impact he managed to use his magic to break their fall, allowing them to land safely on the earthen road.

“Please... help us...” Fratley begged the unknown man, almost incapacitated by the immense strain that his previous feat had put on his body. The surprised traveler immediately got off his ride and approached them. He was a Burmecian too, his clawed feet giving away his origin despite his figure being obscured by a mixture of leather armor and desert clothing.

“You are a dragoon, aren’t you?” the man asked, kneeling to assess both Burmecians’ wounds. *“What happened to you?”*

“My name is Fratley, good sir. She is my wife, Freya. The sandstorm caught us away from home and we fell downhill. She bumped her head and I think my right leg is broken.”

“Fratley and Freya? *The heroes of Burmecia..?*” the man mumbled, astounded, as he checked Freya’s respiration. “Um, sorry... I kind of got carried away. Help me lower her to the ground. Slowly. I’ll stabilize her head to prevent further damage to the spine.”

“Are you some sort of doctor, young man?” Fratley asked as he put his wife on the floor with the traveler’s help.

“You could say so, brave knight. Now hold her like this.”

“Like this?”

“Yes, Excellent,” the man answered, going back to his chocobo to grab a big leather bag.

“May I ask your name, good sir?” the dragoon inquired, his voice filled with gratefulness.

“Oh! Yes... where are my manners? The name’s Ulrich, it’s an honor to meet you.”

“How strange... If I were to judge him solely by your story, I would be inclined to think that he’s a good person...” Garnet said, rubbing her chin.

“His medical work during the Blight was admirable, indeed. A great amount of people, myself included, would be dead if not for him,” Freya answered, taking a sip of her tea. It was cold, but she didn’t mind. Zidane and Tot had stopped running around and were now lying on the grass, basking in the sun like two oversized cats.

“Yes... I remember when he established his network of treatment centers. He also used them to shamelessly spread anti-Alexandrian propaganda,” the queen reminisced.

“Exactly. He exploited his newfound popularity to inject his ideas into the Burmecian society,” Freya added.

“What I don’t understand is how didn’t we learn about your illness... why didn’t Puck or Fratley write us about your condition? Why didn’t Ulrich make it public?”

The dragoon lowered her eyes in shame.

“I... personally requested Ulrich and Fratley to keep it secret, and because I remained at home during the entirety of my recovery, not even Puck himself knew about it.”

“I’m surprised that a power-hungry snake like him didn’t use the story to boost his popularity even further,” Garnet commented.

“If you knew him personally, you wouldn’t be,” the Burmecian replied.

“What are you talking about?”

“Unlike Kuja and most corrupt nobles that we have dealt with, Ulrich honestly believes himself to be a hero. He thinks that offing Puck was an enactment of *justice* and is stubbornly convinced that he will lead the kingdom towards greatness.”

“*Justice*..? Justice for what?”

“As you know, he claims that Burmecia’s alliance with Alexandria is an insult to those who died during the Mist War. He saw Puck as a traitor who no longer deserved to rule and most of the court and the common folk agreed with him. In fact, if he has managed to get away with regicide until now, it’s mostly because almost no one cared if Puck lived or died as long as Ulrich became regent.”

“Oh, dear...” the queen sighed, covering her eyes in frustration, “I can’t imagine how lonely you two must have felt in such a context.”

Freya stared for a while at her old wedding bangle, her eyes glinting with a mixture of fury and sorrow.

“Do you know what hurt me the most?”

Garnet glanced at Freya’s bracelet, realizing where she was going with her question.

“What hurt me the most is that when *he* had to make a choice, he failed to choose me *once again*,” the dragoon growled, clenching her teeth so hard that Garnet thought they would crack.

The queen and the Pluto knight looked at their friend in stunned silence, not knowing how to react.

“Are we talking about..?” Steiner asked, but was promptly cut off by Garnet sternly glancing at him.

“Yes... Fratley. Blinded by Ulrich’s grandiloquent promises, he abandoned Puck’s side and went back into active service as a dragoon under the chancellor’s orders,” the Burmecian confirmed.

“... What? But he was so loyal to his kingdom!” Steiner exclaimed, astounded.

“That’s exactly what made him leave us. He grew so attached to Ulrich after he saved my life that he couldn’t see through his lies,” Freya said,

nostalgically smiling. “It would be endearing if it wasn’t so sad, but I remember Fratley coming home every night and talking over and over about him and everything he had achieved. He was like a child, gushing about his hero...”

“And he had no reason to distrust him, as his first memory of Alexandria is the devastation of his homeland at my mother’s hands...” Garnet added, beginning to see the big picture.

“I know you, and I am *very* aware of all you’ve done to help Burmecia during these years, but the Mist War and the tragedies that ensued were just too much for my people. I must confess that I might have found myself on Ulrich’s side if I wasn’t so fond of you all...” the dragoon said, staring at her own reflection in the half-empty teacup.

“Oh, sweetie...” Garnet sighed, holding Freya’s hand. “You can’t imagine how much I despise myself for not being able to undo all the suffering that mother caused...”

“No Garnet, you put an end to the war and gave us all another chance at life. For that, and everything else, you will forever have my gratitude and my affection,” the Burmecian replied, gently squeezing her friend’s hand and smiling warmly at her. “Don’t

blame yourself for circumstances that escape your control.”

“I still can’t understand why a righteous knight like Fratley would side with a vile murderer instead of you, Lady Freya...” Steiner said angrily.

“Well... about that...” the dragoon said. “He *did* side with that monster against us... but when Ulrich finally tried to kill me for discovering that he had poisoned poor Puck, Fratley distracted him long enough to allow me to escape the kingdom with that information. He should have reached Lindblum by now, but I’m still worried about him...”

“*Poison*, you said? That disgraceful coward! I want to..!” Steiner exploded, furiously gesticulating.

“He... *distracted him*?” Garnet asked, instead, “Please don’t tell me that he can also best *you both* in a fight...”

“No. He’s skilled, but he’s too inexperienced to beat any of us in direct combat. He relies instead on a deadly ace up his sleeve that I forced him to reveal during our duel... and if we are to vanquish him, we must find a way around it first,” Freya stated.

Garnet stared at the dragoon in disbelief.

“... Just what kind of power does this madman wield, Freya?”

“He bears the Mark of the Dragonslayer, and he has used venoms and trickery to feed it more than *a hundred dragon souls*.”

“A Dragon’s Crest..! But didn’t you have one too, Lady Freya?” Steiner gasped, recoiling in shock.

“Yes, but mine is *significantly* weaker. After discovering the necromantic nature of the mark, I decided not to feed it anymore. Not even *dragons* deserve to have their souls devoured.”

“Let me get this straight...” Garnet said, rubbing her temples, “the anti-Alexandrian, murderous bigot that usurped our neighboring kingdom’s throne has a personal army of over a hundred invulnerable spectral dragons...”

“That... sums it up quite well.” Freya replied, biting her lower lip.

The queen stared blankly at the Burmecian for a few seconds.

“... Steiner, could you please ask Quina if we still have some of Blank’s *wedding gift* left?”

“Uh... are you sure, Your Majesty..?” the Pluto Knight asked.

“Sadly, I’m just kidding. Bring Beatrix, I’m gonna fetch Zidane, we need to discuss this right *now*,” the monarch ordered.

“Your Majesty!” an armor-clad man yelled as he ran towards the kiosk.

“*What now?*” Garnet sighed.

The rotund knight reached the structure and gave the queen the missive he carried.

“Your Majesty, you have urgent mail from Burmecia! It’s signed by Chancellor Ulrich!” he blurted out, sweating like a pig.

“*Breireicht! How dare you show up like this in front of the queen?!*” Steiner boomed. The knight squealed in fear.

“Thanks, Breireicht,” the queen said, somewhat calming him down. He then bowed to her and left.

“I swear I’m going to punish him for this...” Steiner mumbled as he drew a short knife and passed it to the monarch.

“Don’t be so hard on him, Steiner,” Garnet said, cutting open the envelope. She started silently reading the letter while Steiner and Freya gathered around her.

“Um... what does it say?” the Burmecian asked, her voice tinged with anxiety.

“Hmph... looks like the dragon has finally decided to crawl out of its cave,” the queen replied.

7. Cherry Tree Hill

“What do you mean I can’t go with you?!”

Everyone in the queen’s study silently stared at Freya, startled by her sudden outburst. Beatrix shot her a terrifying one-eyed glare, making the burmecian’s skin crawl.

“You may be a war hero and a dear friend of the royal couple, but such *insolence* will not be tolerated again, do you understand, Crescent?” the general coldly warned her.

Freya automatically *lost it*.

“How dare *you* of all people talk to me about insolence? Do I need to remind you that this disaster is largely *your* fault?” the dragoon hissed, every word coated in poison.

Steiner gasped and Garnet closed her eyes and started rubbing her temples.

“*You..! I..!*” Beatrix tried to answer, instinctively reaching for her sword’s hilt, but, before anyone could react, her blood-soaked past caught up with

her and she finally relented, “I’m sorry, Crescent... please... try to understand...”

“Freya, Beatrix, you’re both overstepping...” the queen sternly said.

“What we mean, Freya, is that we have no idea how Ulrich will react if he sees you with us during the funeral.” Zidane intervened, trying to calm her down, “He might even try to kill you and we can’t risk everything going to shit just yet...”

“*Vocabulary!*” Steiner silently mouthed to the genome while he awkwardly patted his wife’s back in a misguided attempt to comfort her.

The burmecian found herself cornered and sat down again, burying her face in her hands.

“We know that what we’re asking you to do is particularly hard, but *thousands* of lives are at stake and we can’t afford to *taunt* someone as violently unstable as Ulrich.” Garnet said as gently as she could.

“I understand... it’s just...” the dragoon muttered, “I can’t bear the thought of that *thing* disgracing Puck’s memory while I stay here, grounded, *useless*.”

Beatrix didn't dare look at her. Zidane was amazed: it was the first time he had seen her in such a state. He wondered if the general would ever find redemption for her past misdeeds, especially now that Burmecia's wounds had started festering horrendously.

Freya took a deep breath and quickly pulled herself together, something she had become quite adept at since her youth.

"I'm sorry for letting my emotions cloud my judgement, Garnet." the burmecian said with her usual dignified tone, "Please, let us continue to plan this operation."

Freya had spent the entire afternoon locked up in her room. It was getting late, the pink and orange hues of twilight having almost completely given way to a soothing dark blue. She was lost in her thoughts, pondering what she could do to help her people in her current situation. Three soft knocks on the door interrupted her meditation.

"Hey, Freya..." Zidane tentatively said from the hallway "... are you in the mood for a little chat?"

The burmecian sighed.

“Yes... please come in.” she answered.

Zidane carefully stepped into the guest chamber. He knew his friend was still bitter about having to stay in Alexandria during Puck’s funeral, so he had decided to be as tactful as possible.

“Hi...”

“Hi...”

“How do you feel?”

Freya shrugged, then crossed her arms again.

“Like shit, huh?” Zidane asked. The dragoon nodded her head affirmatively. The genome king lowered his eyes, not knowing what to say.

“You’ve surely been wondering why have I been keeping so many secrets from you, haven’t you?” the burmecian ventured after a moment of awkward silence.

“*Straight to the point, huh?*” Zidane thought, “Kinda... yeah...”

Freya sighed again.

“I guess I was tired of constantly burdening you with my problems...” she said, staring at the wall.

“But... why?” the genome asked, his true nature taking the front seat, “Aren’t we *dragon pals*? Rat-face and Monkey-tail?”

“Zidane, I’ve dragged you into a *warzone* and almost got you killed. *Twice*. And what the heck is a *dragon pal*?” she replied, exasperated.

The king chortled.

“Remember that time we went to Popos Heights? You were all *gung-ho* about hunting a dragon to prove yourself and stuff.”

“Oh, no... please, don’t...” Freya started complaining, but Zidane kept talking.

“You should have seen your face when we ended up in that gross ass ditch, drenched in *fucking dragon p...*”

“Okay, okay, I remember!” she exclaimed, chuckling in spite of herself, “Sorry for that too, by the way...”

“Sorry for *what*? It was *awesome*! And we freaking killed like *three* of them! Then you got that cool tattoo *thingy* that summoned giant dragon

ghosts and we even wrecked *Necron's* shit with it!" Zidane rambled, having fully reverted to his teenaged self for a moment.

"So? What's your point?" Freya asked him.

"My point is that *we stuck together*, and we ended up doing the impossible *because* of it!" the genome exclaimed.

Freya smiled and closed her eyes.

"Zidane... as you've told me before, things have changed. We no longer are the adrenaline-addled kids that we used to be back then. You are now a king with an entire kingdom resting on your shoulders... you have far more important things to do than to worry about me."

The genome glared at her, outraged by her remark. Like *he*, of all people, would abandon his loved ones because he now had a fancy job!

"*Bullshit!* You sure you haven't been dating *Amarant* or something? Because you're starting to sound like him!" he brusquely retorted, taking the burmecian by surprise, "Now get up and come with me. I'm gonna show you just how much I still care about my friends!"

The king and the dragoon walked silently through the moonlit royal garden. Whenever Freya visited the castle, she liked to go outside after dinner to enjoy the subtle symphony of sounds and aromas unique to that place's nights.

"We're almost there" Zidane said, turning left at a bifurcation.

"We have never gone left here..." Freya commented, intrigued by the prospect of discovering a new part of the garden.

"That's because this area has been closed due to a little project that we've been working on." the genome answered.

"Wait... what is that?" the burmecian said, detecting a long forgotten scent in the air.

"Smells familiar?" Zidane asked her, grinning.

Freya stopped dead on her tracks and took in the faint aroma, trying to remember what did it belong to.

"It can't be..." she muttered, opening her eyes in shock.

“Hell yes it can!” the king gleefully exclaimed.

“But how did you..? When..?”

“Follow me, I’ll explain in due time!” Zidane answered.

The duo arrived at a brick wall with an iron gate. The king drew a bunch of keys from his pocket and started fiddling with it, trying to find the one he needed. The scent, despite being almost imperceptible, was driving Freya crazy due to her extremely acute sense of smell. She would have leaped over the wall if her legs weren’t still weak.

“Ah, here it is!” he exclaimed, finally managing to unlock the door, “Enjoy yourself!”

The dragoon barged in, her anxiety getting the best of her. She suddenly stood still, unable at first to process what she was witnessing.

“The burmecian cherry blossom tree is a particularly delicate plant.” Zidane explained while he closed the door behind him, “You are now seeing what is probably the last reserve of them in Gaia after the Great Drought almost wiped them all out.”

Freya’s crutch slipped from her grasp and fell to the ground as she stared, moved to tears, at the

garden's newest section.

"When I was a child, we had one of these at home..." she said, slowly approaching one of the trees, "this one will bloom shortly. Fifteen days, give or take..."

"You talk like an expert." Zidane replied.

"Mother loved these flowers. She taught me everything I know about them." the burmecian said, taking a moment to breathe in the scent of her childhood.

"Hmm... we've never talked about your family before..." the genome remarked, rubbing his chin.

"The people of Burmecia is my family now..." she answered, dodging the subject, "I can't imagine how hard it must have been to gather this many trees. They are almost extinct. What made you undertake such an effort?" the burmecian turned around to face her friend. He greeted her with a warm smile.

"We originally envisioned this as a symbol of everlasting peace between our kingdoms..." the king replied, approaching her, "If I've learned something during my years as an actor, it's that beauty is a powerful instrument of change."

Zidane suddenly found himself in Freya's arms.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, her unprecedented display of affection having taken him completely off-guard.

"Thank you..." she whispered, releasing him after a few seconds.

"Never thought you to be of the hugging type... but suits you well." the king teased her.

"Not really, but... I couldn't convey in words how much this means to me."

"Heheh... we didn't do it alone, you know? Puck gave us everything we needed to build it. I hope he'll be able to see it filled with happy burmecian families from wherever he is now." Zidane said, looking skyward with a sad smile.

Snap!

Freya's ears suddenly twitched and she turned around, assuming a fighting stance.

"Freya, what's going on? You're freaking me out!" the genome said, alarmed.

"We've got company!" She exclaimed, baring her teeth like an animal.

A hooded, leather armor-clad warrior emerged from the foliage. “Bravo, Crescent! Your senses are as sharp as ever!” he said.

Author’s note:

Hi! Jota Te here! I wanted to thank you all for reading this and for all the support I’ve received via reviews and PMs. As a die-hard FFIIX fan, I’m overjoyed to see that people like my little tribute to its wonderful fictional universe.

Yes, while heavily modified, the “dragon hunting trip gone south” bit is a reference to Myshu’s “Practical Medicine” fic. If you haven’t read it yet, go check it out: it’s a beautiful, bittersweet tale of love and friendship from which I’ve drawn a great deal of inspiration for this story. By the way, thank you for all your help and support, Myshu, you’re awesome :)

I hope you’re all doing great and (I’ve always wanted to say this) stay tuned for more adventures of Rat-Face and Monkey-Tail, heheh!

8. The Calling

“*Oh man, we’ve screwed up big time...*” Zidane thought when the armored stranger started walking towards them. He was definitely burmecian, his clawed feet grazing the earth with each step.

The king glanced at the trees. How many foes were still lurking in the shadows? Did they have them in their sights without him even noticing?

“Identify yourself!” Freya barked.

“Don’t you recognize my voice, *Cherry*? You break my poor heart!” the intruder retorted.

The dragoon gasped.

“*Sir Wulfweard..?* Is that *you..?*” she asked, astounded by his presence in Alexandria.

“Technically I’m no longer a knight, but yes, it’s me,” the warrior replied, he then put down his hood to reveal his face. He was an old, grizzled Burmecian whose drooping whiskers had grown long enough to resemble a mustache.

“Uh... Freya? Mind telling me who’s this guy and why is he calling you *Cherry*?” Zidane intervened, poking his friend’s shoulder to call her attention.

“Oh, sorry for that...” she apologized, “he was my instructor during my years at the academy... and *Cherry* is military slang for *rookie*.”

“And let’s not forget about your *lucky raincoat*...” the old soldier added, tittering under his breath. “You acted, *and looked like*, a giant cherry.”

Zidane snorted and made a mental note to tease Freya about her nickname later.

“What are you doing here, sir?” the dragoon asked him, lowering her guard. Zidane was unsure about trusting him so quickly, so he kept a hand close to his concealed dagger.

“Oh, please, you can drop the formalities, girl.” he answered, drawing a small metal box from one of his pockets. He then approached his old student and handed it to her, “I was secretly tasked a month ago by King Puck to give you this if Ulrich ever managed to usurp the throne.”

“*Huh..?!*” she mumbled, stunned by his words. She then took the golden case and studied it for a

moment; it was very light, richly ornate and had the Dragon's Crest engraved on its lid.

"I must warn you..." Wulfweard said, his voice tinged with apprehension, "What lies inside will imperil your very *soul* should you decide to open it."

"Wait, wait, wait, hold on!" Zidane intervened, waving the warrior off, "What is all this soul *mumbo-jumbo* all of a sudden? Why is that thing so dangerous? Why would Puck give her something like *that*? I mean, why should we *trust* you, Sir *Wulfweird* or whatever you're called?"

The old dragoon smirked.

"You are Lord Zidane Tribal, King Consort of Alexandria, Savior of Gaia, am I right?" the burmecian politely inquired.

"I sure as hell am, so tell me why shouldn't I kick your ass and throw you into jail for infiltrating the castle and giving my friend an artifact of doom!" the genome exclaimed.

"*Zidane..!*" Freya blurted out, scandalized.

"It's fine, girl, what he says is completely understandable." Wulfweard conceded. He then produced a fist sized artifact from a leather pouch

strapped to his belt. It was made of brass and loosely resembled a human heart. Its most striking feature was a small transparent window at its center that revealed a dimly glowing crystal core. “Allow me to give you this as a token of my trustworthiness, Your Majesty.”

“What is this..?” Freya inquired, intrigued by the otherworldly device.

“We found it while raiding one of Ulrich’s secret warehouses. He has been smuggling some strange containers into our kingdom, hiding them in remote locations to avoid attracting the court’s attention.” the old burmecian answered, “There were some kind of... mechanical *monsters* inside those ‘*coffins*’. We took this from the chest cavity of one of them. We suspect it to be its power source.”

Cold sweat started running down Zidane’s brow. *He didn’t like the sound of that story at all.*

“What do you think those... *things* are?” Freya asked, disturbed by her instructor’s report.

“I don’t know, but we identified four distinct types of these *machines*, each bearing a code name and a number on its container’s lid: ‘*Shiva*’, ‘*Ifrit*’, ‘*Ramuh*’ and ‘*Odin*’.” Wulfweard said, taking a

small notebook out of his pouch, “Here, I had my team’s specialist speed-draw them for you.”

Zidane and Freya started looking at the illustrations. Nightmarish clockwork aberrations glared back at them from the sketchbook’s pages, sending shivers down their spines.

“Wait a second... Shiva, Ifrit, Ramuh...” Zidane muttered, “that would be ice, fire and lightning...”

“And look at the retractable blades inside the Odin model’s arms...” Freya added, marking them with her finger.

“They must be golems of some sort... unmanned war machines...” Zidane said, staring at a drawing of an *Ifrit*’s head, “Where the hell did Ulrich get weapons like these?”

“They are most likely mass-produced. Only two other realms in Gaia are currently capable of such a technological feat.” Wulfweard said, “And we’ve known for a while that most of Ulrich’s resources come from Treno, so that pretty much narrows down the answer to one possibility: *the nation that never sleeps.*”

Treno. That name flooded Zidane’s mind with bad memories, both old and recent ones. A terrifying

realization dawned on him.

“Fire... ice... lightning!” he exclaimed, prompting both Burmecians to stare blankly at him. “Freya, hand me the heart, please!”

The dragoon obliged. Zidane looked for a moment at the strange device’s core. Suddenly, he understood what he was looking at.

“*Son of a bitch!*” he yelled, repressing an almost irresistible urge to destroy the artifact.

“Zidane, what’s wrong?!” Freya asked him, startled by his outburst.

“This is a *Black Waltz* core!” the genome told her, so enraged that he could barely talk.

“*What?! But how?! There is no more mist to create them!*” Freya exclaimed, terrified by the prospect of a clandestine black mage army hidden right under Burmecia.

“Look at the crystal! It’s a human soul!” Zidane screamed. “Those *motherfuckers* have been making these things out of *people!*”

Freya felt the need to throw up, but managed to contain herself. Sir Wulfweard stared in shock at the abominable contraption, wondering what kind of

twisted *beast* could be responsible of such an atrocity.

“What in the name of Reis is Ulrich *doing..?*” the old warrior muttered, “Ruin is the only possible outcome of this blasphemy!”

Zidane was going to suggest immediately returning to the castle when he noticed that something was off about Freya. He called her name but she seemed to have retreated deep into herself. She was trembling, her eyes closed, her fists clenched. Her Dragon’s Crest abruptly started shining beneath her shirt and the emblem carved on Puck’s reliquary responded with its own purple glow.

“*Oh, no...*” Sir Wulfweard muttered with a broken voice.

“What?! What’s happening?!” Zidane shouted.

“Her wrath has attracted the *Allfather’s* attention... he’s calling her to replace Lord Puck as his *Spear...*” he replied, a single tear rolling down his cheek, “Poor girl... it didn’t have to be this way...”

The old dragoon then prostrated himself in adoration.

“Are you insane, geezer?! *Freya! Freya snap out of it!*” the genome yelled and tried to reach for her. The spectral head of a dragon emerged from her body and rammed him with so much force that he was thrown against a nearby tree, breaking it in half like a twig.

...

“*Open your eyes, child.*” a deep voice boomed. It seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Freya obeyed. She immediately gasped, terrified by what she was seeing.

“*Wh-what kind of sorcery is this?!*” the burmecian stammered. She no longer was in the Royal Garden or in Alexandria. She was in a place that did not even exist anymore: the house where she grew up.

9. Shattered Mirror

Warning: graphic violence ahead.

Freya looked around: the room she was in was undoubtedly her own. She stared, amazed, at her old belongings: they were lovingly arranged as if she had never left.

“What in Reis’s name is this place..?” she wondered, taking a book off a wooden shelf. It contained a selection of tales about brave knights rescuing beautiful princesses. She chuckled, remembering how much all those damsels in distress annoyed her as a child: she would stubbornly refuse to be anything else than a valiant dragoon whenever she played with other kids, a trait that tended to intimidate most of them and to exasperate the rest, *especially* when the game had nothing to do with slaying giant reptiles.

A silver glint caught her eye. She recoiled in shock when she realized that it was the reflection of light on her grandfather’s spear head, a priceless relic that he had given her on his deathbed. It was

mounted on the wall as it had been for years before her departure for the military academy.

“No way...” she said, approaching the blade to give it a closer look. To her utter astonishment, it seemed to be the real deal. She remembered how much she had wanted it as a kid. Grandpa Kain was so proud about her being *that* much into dragoon culture that he had promised to leave her his weapon when she was ready to wield it.

“*I hope you are still proud of me...*” she whispered, touching the blade with two fingers.

“More than ever!”

“*Huh?!*” she uttered as she quickly turned around.

“Hello there, Freya! It’s been far too long!” her grandfather boisterously greeted her, having seemingly materialized in the middle of the room. He started walking towards her, his arms outstretched and a big grin on his face, “C’mere, give your grandpa a big hug!”

“No... no, you can’t be here!” Freya stammered, ripping the spear head out of its mounting and pointing it at the apparition, “*Back off, impostor!*” she barked, furious and terrified at the same time.

The robust burmecian blinked twice and burst into laughter, weirding her out. He was a hulking mountain of muscle with a savage, partially braided mane and a large potbelly that he loved to joke about when he was drunk.

“You truly are the spitting image of your mom, kiddo!” Kain exclaimed, “Speaking of which, she’s waiting for you outside!”

“Wait, *what?* Mother is..? I mean..!” Freya stammered, rubbing her eyes. Kain was *definitely* still there when she opened them again. She then tried something more drastic: using her blade, she slightly cut the palm of her hand, drawing a little blood. “*What in the name of..?!?*” she squeaked when the wound magically closed itself, not even leaving a scar behind.

Grandpa Crescent let out another hearty laugh, confusing her even more than she already was.

“You done fooling around, kid? You can’t get permanently hurt in *Fólkvangr*! That’s the fun part of this place!” he loudly asserted, prompting his grandchild to stare at him in utter shock.

“What did you just say?” she asked, suddenly feeling lightheaded.

“Exactly what you heard! Welcome to the *Field of Warriors*, little one!” he answered, “Now, will you give poor old gramps a hug? You can’t imagine how much I’ve missed you!”

“*The Fólkvangr..? Am I..?*” she wondered, barely able to form any coherent thought after being told by her *long dead grandfather* that she was essentially in the fabled burmecian *afterlife*. “Is *any* of this real? Can I trust you?” she inquired, knowing full well how useless those questions were in her current situation.

“Yes and *bloody yes!*” he exclaimed, “If you don’t believe me, ask me something only I would know!”

Freya stared at the weapon in her hand. She took a deep breath, unsure about what she was going to do if he answered correctly.

“Alright, then... what did you whisper in my ear the day you gave me this?” the dragoon asked him.

“Hah! That’s an easy one!” he chuckled, “I told you that as long as you had the blade you’d never fight alone! I even went as far as to ask Lady Reis to have it appear to you in Memoria after you lost it! That woman is a total sweetheart, if you ask me!”

“Do you mean... that’s why it was there?” Freya asked, her eyes welling up, “You’ve been watching over me all this time?”

“Of course, kiddo! Did you really think I would abandon you over something as trivial as losing a piece of metal?” he said with the warmest smile she had seen in decades. Freya silently approached him with a growing smile. Despite her now being in her early forties, the man still dwarfed her in size and he lost no time to put that difference into use by lifting her in a bone-crushing embrace, loudly laughing the whole time.

“Hah! My noble, powerful Freya! I’m so glad to see you again!” the giant exclaimed, gently putting his grandchild back on the ground, “Your mother awaits, what do you say we go meet her, eh?”

“Sure... lead the way grandpa.” she happily answered.

The Crescents traversed the wooden hallways of the house like they used to do decades ago. Despite all the nostalgic bliss, Freya was quite aware of how unnatural that place was: it seemed to be frozen in time a decade before the Mist War, judging by the

presence of objects and furniture that weren't there anymore when she came back home as a teenager. She theorized that *Fólkvangr* was a *state of the soul* rather than an actual, defined location, reflecting the happiest memories of its inhabitants like a rose-colored mirror; a kind of magic not much unlike the one that had birthed Memoria. That, or she was being lured into an ambush by a plain old illusion that sadistically preyed upon her desire to see her loved ones again... but why bother with *that* level of detail if she was already trapped there with no obvious way out?

Kain stopped in front of a double door and turned around to face Freya, grinning widely.

“Even here, mamma Frigg still tends to her stupid pink trees all day long. Wanna give her a good scare?” the giant proposed her.

“Is it even possible to surprise mother? I mean, I have good hearing but she is an outright *monster*...” the dragoon replied, smirking.

“We will never know if we don't try!” Kain answered, winking at her. He then shushed her and slowly opened the gate leading to the garden.

Freya covered her mouth to avoid letting out a loud gasp: her late mother was pruning the same old cherry tree that they used to have. One thing was being told that Frigg was there and another, completely different one, was seeing her, more beautiful than ever under the golden sunlight.

Kain put a finger to his lips and took Freya's hand, they then started silently walking towards the seemingly oblivious woman.

"You know I can hear you, Kain..." Frigg said, turning around, "You're way too noisy, even when you..."

Her scissors fell off her hand, firmly embedding themselves into the ground.

"Freya..?" she asked, her lower lip trembling so much that she could barely talk.

"*Mother!*" her daughter shouted, closing the distance between them with the fastest sprint she had ever performed.

"Ah!" Frigg yelped as Freya accidentally tackled her to the ground. Both women laughed as they nuzzled each other for the first time in almost thirty years.

“Oh, mother... I’m so glad that you made it to *Fólkvangr*!” Freya said, wiping her tears off her eyes, “I’ve mourned you for so long... praying for your souls to reach the glorious *Field*! Oh! Where’s father? I want to see him too!”

Frigg’s warm smile slowly evaporated.

“Darling, I...” she stammered.

“What’s wrong, mother?” Freya inquired, unable at first to understand the sudden change in her mood. Her mother gasped for air once, her eyes turning red, “Mother... where’s father?” the dragoon asked, her jaw starting to tremble.

“I... failed him.” Frigg muttered, stroking her daughter’s hair.

“What do you mean..? Wait, no... *no*...” Freya exclaimed, the awful truth dawning on her.

“I’m sorry, kid...” Kain said, approaching them. “He passed away before the ritual was complete...”

Fragments of the past started flooding Freya’s mind like a tidal wave: her disastrous attempts at learning music from her father, the time he taught her how to dance, his sudden illness and the letter

she found when she came back to an empty home as a dragoon.

She sat up in complete silence, numb, absent, lost. A freezing cold grew inside her, turning her blood into ice and her heart into stone. She gave her own Dragon's Crest a scornful, bitter stare. For the first time in her life, she found the idea of eternal life repulsive: rotten to the core was this so-called *paradise* that let murderers like her *in* and doomed kind souls like her father's to oblivion. She would have embraced annihilation in a heartbeat if that could bring him back, but she knew full well that there was nothing left to save once one dissolved into the Crystal.

"I'm sorry..." Frigg muttered, sitting up alongside her daughter.

"It's not your fault, mother... you even gave your own life trying to save his soul." Freya answered without even looking at her. She took a nearby fallen leaf and gazed at it for a moment before crushing it, "It's this awful place's fault... he deserved eternity more than any dragon slayer..."

"*Shhh..!* Father Berlioz is listening and he sure does *loathe* blasphemy..." Frigg worriedly whispered.

“The *nerve* of him, spying on us like that, forcing us to kill... I’m starting to think that returning to the Crystal ain’t such a bleak fate after all...” Freya growled, the beast within her stirring once again. Her mother could have sworn that white, vaporous fumes emanated from her daughter’s skin like steam before she took a deep breath, making them vanish.

A swirling, unnatural storm started forming above the house. Heavy rain began falling as the tempest grew more and more violent.

“Damnit, kid! You’ve *really* pissed him off!” Kain said, staring into the dark vortex.

The Allfather was *furious*.

“Father Berlioz, please give us more time... she doesn’t know what she’s say..!” Frigg begged, but he did not listen to her.

Before anyone could react, a blinding pillar of light obliterated the cherry tree, causing a deafening explosion that sent the three burmecians flying. They hit the walls of the house and then fell to the floor with a loud thud.

“Mother... grandfather... are you alright?!” Freya asked, rising to her feet.

“You should worry about yourself, rat!”

Like a lion, the burmecian god of war and death leaped out of the smoke cloud left behind by the lightning strike, charging straight at Freya spear in hand.

“Plate armor... how dishonorable...” she thought, realizing that she would have to work hard to even *touch* him. Her reflexes, honed through decades of fighting, allowed her to dodge his first attack: a direct thrust to the neck. She trapped his spear under her right arm and stepped into hand-to-hand range, her Dragon’s Crest shining brightly.

“Eat this!” she shouted as the power of the *mark* flowed through her arm and into her fist. The dragon souls seemed to *love* the idea of hurting Berlioz, because they went all out, turning her punch into a mystical battering ram.

The warlike deity grunted as the dragoon’s knuckles sank into his visor, destroying it. Freya ducked under his blind counterattack and quickly followed up with a fierce elbow to the gut that made the house *tremble*. She then tried exploiting the opening to disarm him, but Berlioz was having none of it: he bashed his armored head into her skull like a mace and then lifted her off the ground with an

uppercut capable of piercing an airship's hull. In a fraction of a second, he grabbed her by the ankle and violently spun, throwing her like a rag doll against the burning cherry tree. Freya screamed in agony: a broken branch had impaled her on impact, pinning her to the trunk. She desperately struggled to free herself, but the blinding pain prevented her from channeling the Crest's power and pleading with the gods for strength was out of the question.

"Pray to me, rat! Beg for your life!" Berlioz howled as he closed in for the kill, ripping his ruined visor off his helmet to reveal two burning coals, shining from the depths of a pitch black abyss.

"Hands off my daughter, you coward!" Frigg screamed, landing on the god's back and frantically plunging a short knife into his neck. Completely unfazed by the attack, Berlioz grabbed her by the collar and smashed her into the ground with so much force that the floor *cracked* beneath her. Despite being still dizzy, the seasoned dragoon managed to roll sideways just in time to avoid a killing spear thrust.

"You've got some nerve, hag." the *Allfather* snarled, throwing in Frigg's direction a devastating barrage of punches, kicks and stabs. The badly

battered burmecian managed to dodge most of them before getting stunned by a terrible blow to the face. Berlioz used the opening to run her through with his polearm.

“*Hnnrrgghhh..!*” grunted the dragoon, almost drowning in her own blood, but she was absolutely *not* going down without a fight. “*Mother Reis, give me the strength to protect my family!*” she prayed. She then spat on Berlioz’s eyes, distracting him long enough to slip a green-glowing right hook through his guard, tearing off a piece of his helmet with her fist.

“*Nice punch, Frigg!*” Kain shouted, smashing an iron garden chair against Berlioz’s head, knocking him back and forcing him to release his weapon, “*You’re messing with the wrong family, motherfucker!*” the giant yelled as he charged towards his adversary, trying to take the fight to the ground.

The god roared, outraged by Reis helping mere mortals fend him off. He then kneed Kain in the jaw, lifting him off the ground as if the old dragoon was a feather pillow, and then he kicked him in the belly, sending him hurtling across the garden. Blinded by rage, Berlioz used his tremendous speed to dash *past*

him while he was still mid-air and smashed him over the head with both fists before he reached the wall, burying him face-first into the ground.

“Kain!” Frigg yelled, her joints no longer able to support her body. She fell to her knees as the Destroyer walked towards her, his killing intent fueling his blazing glare.

“Beg for forgiveness, rat, and I *might* spare your soul.” the *Allfather* snarled, gripping the spear shaft still sticking out of her chest.

The sight of Berlioz toying with her mortally wounded mother made something *snap* inside Freya’s mind. The *monster*, chained deep within her, stirred and thrashed, breaking its bindings and crawling towards the surface like fire rising through a chimney.

“*Die...*” she wheezed, an ethereal haze dancing around her.

Berlioz shifted his attention to the youngest burmecian. Under his shredded helmet he cracked a crazed grin.

“Would you look at that, woman... looks like our little *squabble* has awakened the beast!” he joyfully exclaimed, ripping his spear from Frigg’s body in

one swift motion. She fell to the ground gasping for air, the hole in her chest magically sealing itself.

“Die... die... die... die...” Freya repeated, her flesh turning into burning white steel. The branch that held her prisoner burst into flames and *disintegrated*, releasing her tranced form from the tree.

“DIE!” she roared, launching a savage flurry of energy javelins towards Berlioz.

“Child’s play!” he guffawed, twirling his weapon like a whirlwind to deflect the blinding bolts of light. When the dust settled, he realized that she had disappeared without him noticing. *“Above..!”* he thought, looking skyward just in time to see Freya dive-bombing him with a lance made of raw spiritual power. He blocked the attack with his spear’s shaft, the sheer force of the impact fracturing the ground beneath him.

“That’s more like it!” he exclaimed, burning eyes glaring at her through their interlocked weapons. He then launched her upwards with a swing of his polearm. Freya didn’t even bother landing, effortlessly remaining airborne like a fiery goddess of death. Berlioz smirked at the sight and assumed a battle stance.

“Come, child! Your trial begins *now!*” he roared.

10. The Oath

“*Oh, man..!*” Zidane winced, sitting up amidst the fallen cherry tree’s remains.

“Are you alright, Your Majesty?” Sir Wulfweard inquired, helping him stand up.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m *fine...*” he grumbled, dusting himself off, “Geez, what’s gotten into her to hit me like *that?*”

“That was one of Father Berlioz’s miracles. He won’t let anyone interfere with the Trial.” the old soldier explained, “You should be grateful that he didn’t kill you outright for trying to stop the ritual.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t get any of this supernatural shit...” the genome said, rubbing his sore lower back, “Tell me one thing: will Freya be alright?”

“Well... that depends entirely on her...” the veteran dragoon replied.

The king looked at Freya. She seemed to be sleeping, but at the same time she was *levitating*, wreathed in a strange mystical aura.

“I don’t like the sound of that...” Zidane commented, unnerved by the sight of his friend *floating*, “Who’s this Father Berlioz, by the way? I’ve heard her mention that name a couple times...”

“Father Berlioz was *the* original dragoon and the first sentient being to harness the power of draconic magic.” Wulfweard replied, “He is the creator of the Dragon’s Crest and our patron deity of war, death and the afterlife.”

“That sounds pretty dark...” Zidane said before realizing about something, “Hold on a second, did you just say ‘*afterlife*’?”

“Yes. Father Berlioz became so unfathomably powerful through the *Crest’s* magic that he transcended mortality, managing to exist in spiritual form without being pulled into the Cycle of Souls. He is also capable of granting that gift to those he deems worthy of it.”

The genome stared at the old soldier in utter disbelief.

“You mean it’s not a myth what they say about burmecians not returning to the Crystal after death?” he asked.

“Well... not all souls manage to reach his domain, of course.” Wulfweard clarified, “Only those who have obtained a Dragon’s Crest through glorious combat are allowed into it.”

Zidane recoiled in shock.

“Huh?! So if you are not strong enough to kill one of the most dangerous beasts on Gaia you’re barred from the afterlife?!” he gasped, seeing now the disastrous trip to Popos Heights in a completely different light. “That’s why Freya was so desperate to get her own *Crest! Duuuude... I feel like crap now...*”

“Why is that, if I may ask?” the burmecian inquired, bemused by the king’s sudden vulgar commentary.

“Well... I went dragon hunting with her once, mainly because she was planning to do it alone and that got me worried. Those things ended up cornering us and we had to hide inside a freaking *dragon pit latrine* for almost a day... *aaaand I might have gone bananas and called her an idiot* for getting us stuck in that shithole of death.” the genome sheepishly answered, scratching the back of his head, “In my defense, I was poisoned at the time, I

didn't know anything about this *and* she insulted me first."

Sir Wulfweard blinked twice before bursting into laughter.

"Looks like good ol' *Cherry* will never change!" he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" Zidane inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"During her years at the academy, she would constantly get herself *and others* into trouble because she wouldn't tell anyone when she was tired, sick, hurt or in pain." the old dragoon reminisced, "She thinks that asking for help, even when it would benefit everyone, will make her look weak. I understand her, though, even if I don't approve of her behavior... being the last heir to a heroic lineage would have turned me into an insane perfectionist too..."

"You look like an insane perfectionist yourself, if you ask me." the genome quipped, "I mean, what with that super-spy shtick of yours and freaking getting the jump on us at your... well..."

"... age?" the burmecian said, shooting him a sideways glare, "With all due respect, Your Majesty,

a *moogle* could have killed you thrice tonight. You're recklessly exposing yourself *and* the kingdom by letting *Cherry* be seen *at all, especially* outside of the castle."

"I know..." the crestfallen genome answered, "I just couldn't handle seeing her like that. We've been through a lot together, you know?"

"I understand, but you can't afford letting your feelings endanger the millions of lives that depend on us." Wulfweard dryly retorted.

Zidane silently stared at Freya for a moment.

"There's gonna be a war, isn't it?" he muttered, feeling a lump in his throat.

"Not if we make things right before Ulrich attacks." the old soldier said, he then looked the king in the eye, "Do you know what's the purpose of the Trial?"

"You tell me, I have no idea what's going on..." the genome replied.

"The right to the burmecian throne is of divine origin. Lord Puck was the last direct descendant of Lord Athelric, the first Spear of Berlioz. With him out of the picture, the royal lineage is effectively

extinguished and nobody can rightfully become king now... *unless* the Allfather gives someone his blessing.” Sir Wulfweard explained.

“Wait... what?!” Zidane blurted out, utterly astonished, “You mean that Puck planned to have Freya become queen of Burmecia to take Ulrich down?!”

“It was supposed to be a last resort, since there is a very good reason for which no one has become king that way after Lord Athelric. The *Box* has been stolen multiple times by greedy aspirants to the throne and it has always ended with the royal family retrieving it from their charred corpses. Lord Berlioz is as powerful as he is merciless and only a single man has ever survived his Judgement.”

“Ah, but Freya is Burmecia’s strongest dragoon! She can do this, can’t she?” the king nervously inquired, glancing at her.

“Strength alone is not enough to pass this test, I’m afraid.” Wulfweard somberly stated, “It takes a singular, truly *indomitable* spirit to best Father Berlioz in a duel, especially in his own realm where the rules of this world do not apply.”

Zidane gulped.

“W-what happens if she loses to him? I mean... he didn’t even give her a choice!” he stammered.

“I don’t know, for the circumstances of this Trial are unique...” the old dragoon answered, “But if we are *really* unlucky, he will consume her soul and destroy her body as he has done with every single defeated challenger.

Zidane’s heart skipped a beat. He took a deep breath and went silent, closing his eyes to focus on controlling himself.

“Your Majesty..?” Wulfweard said when he noticed the genome’s hair starting to *float* as if he was underwater. The veteran dragoon *flinched* when a pair of blazing rhodonites stared into his soul, making his fur stand on end.

“*I warn you, old man...*” the king said, his voice horrifically distorted as if he was possessed by Ifrit himself, **“*if that happens, I will personally rip you apart, limb... by... limb...*”**

A blinding flash of light cut Zidane’s threat short, allowing him to regain control. Both men stared in awe as Freya entered Trance while still unconscious, transforming into a burning, steel armored wraith.

“Shit...” the genome muttered.

A deafening explosion lit up the skies as Freya and Berlioz clashed above the ruined garden.

“What are you waiting for, child?! Show me your true strength!” the Allfather boomed, exchanging savage blows with the frenzied burmecian.

Freya roared like a beast before viciously headbutting him twice in quick succession, leaving him wide open for her to fire an energy javelin at his face. The resulting blast sent him plummeting to the ground, but the god recovered just in time to land on his feet with feline precision.

“Obstinate child...” he muttered as a hail of blazing spears rained from above, obliterating the area he was standing on. Freya growled in frustration when the dust settled, revealing that Berlioz had survived the onslaught largely unscathed while she was quickly getting exhausted.

“I warn you, girl: disappointing me is a foolish thing to do!” Berlioz shouted at her. He then plunged his fingers into his breastplate and teared it apart like *paper*, revealing a full-torso Dragon’s Crest. Just like his head, his entire body seemed to be made of living, shifting shadows.

“This is what a *real* dragon technique looks like!” he howled as his *Crest* shone brighter than the sun itself, unleashing a myriad of dragon specters that homed in on Freya like rabid hellhounds. Even in her rage-addled state, she knew full well that flying away was futile, for they would relentlessly chase her until her Trance dissipated. She summoned a burning javelin to her hand and stared defiantly into the face of Death, ready to make her last stand.

“You ready, Frigg?” Kain Crescent uttered. He had recovered from Berlioz’s devastating attack and was now standing in front of Freya’s mother. The woman nodded and started running towards him.

“Now!” the giant shouted as Frigg leaped, landing onto his intertwined hands. “*Mother Reis, give us strength!*” they shouted in unison as Kain launched the lithe dragoon skyward with all his might.

“*Freya!*” Frigg yelled, rocketing towards her daughter at incredible speed.

“Mom..?” she uttered, her true self overcoming the *monster* upon seeing her mother entering the *kill zone*.

“*Cherry Blossom! Now!*” Frigg ordered. Freya blinked twice and nodded, focusing her remaining

power into her energy javelin. *“Here goes!”* she shouted, throwing the charged projectile into the incoming wave of spirits.

Frigg imbued Kain’s spear head with raw, unbridled spiritual force and aimed for her daughter’s rapidly moving javelin. This time she didn’t need to pray, for Reis blessed her spontaneously. She took a deep breath, comforted by the goddess’ soothing presence and hurled the blade, divine magic guiding her arm.

“What the..?” Berlioz muttered when both weapons collided, bursting into a gigantic swirl of flower petals. The spectral dragons that he had summoned screamed and writhed in pain, igniting on contact with the burmecians’ spell.

“Interesting... could she be the one..?” the Allfather wondered, smirking.

Completely drained by her final attack, Freya lost stability. Her Trance dissipated, making her plummet to the ground, but Kain was already on his way to catch her.

“Gotcha!” he exclaimed when he managed to grab hold of her, casting a fall-dampening spell immediately after.

“Thanks grandpa...” Freya muttered, hugging him tightly.

“Look at that, kiddo!” Kain said, pointing at Berlioz, who was calmly waiting for them, “Seems like the Trial is over! *You did it!*”

“Let’s not lower our guards... he doesn’t even look tired.” Freya somberly stated.

“Hmph... yeah, you’re right...” the giant agreed, softly landing on the garden.

“Come, children, I shall pass my final verdict on you.” the Allfather ordered, summoning his throne out of thin air and sitting on it.

“*How vain...*” Freya thought while Kain lowered her to the ground. She then started walking towards Berlioz, giving the ruined cherry tree a disapproving stare as she passed it by.

“Kneel, girl. You may mourn the plants later.” the deity scoffed.

The dragoon glared at him for a moment before falling on her knees, killing him a dozen times in her mind. Kain and Frigg approached her and quietly stood at her side.

“Kain, Frigg, well done. You have fulfilled your duties as Freya’s champions admirably despite your blasphemous tendencies. As a reward, you will be allowed to properly bid her farewell before I send her back to Gaia.”

“Thank you, My Lord.” Frigg replied, heaving a sigh of relief.

Berlioz slightly nodded and shifted his attention to the youngest burmecian.

“I expected more from you, child.” the god stated, “You may be remarkably strong by mortal standards, but you have shown little inventive, your technique is good, but you run out of tricks quickly and you can’t control your Trance form, reducing you to flailing around like an animal.”

Freya gritted her teeth and bit back a caustic retort before she got her family and herself into more trouble.

“However, there are two things that I want to congratulate you for.” Berlioz continued, “First of all, you may be a blasphemous, whiny heretic with a pathetically underdeveloped *Crest*, but you fought me, *a god of war*, with nothing but your own strength. Countless accomplished dragonslayers

have challenged me for millennia but only *you* have survived, despite refusing mid-battle to use divine or draconic enhancements. If there is one thing I respect, woman, it's *courage*, even when it borders on suicidal foolishness."

"*Heheh...*" Kain chuckled, filled with pride.

"The second thing is that interesting technique of yours, the last one you used. How do you call it?" the god inquired.

"It's called '*Cherry Blossom*', sir..." she answered.

"*Cherry Blossom...*" Berlioz repeated, "Tell me, how does it work? I've never seen a dragon spell that doesn't require divine assistance to be cast."

Freya hesitated. She looked at her mother, asking for permission to answer. Frigg nodded affirmatively.

"It uses spiritual energy just like any other dragon technique, sir." the dragoon reluctantly explained, "What changes is the catalyst that gives the spell its nature and form."

"And what is that... '*catalyst*' of yours?" the god asked, incapable of hiding his interest.

Freya's ears turned red with embarrassment. She had always *hated* how corny the answer to that question sounded.

“*True love*, sir...” she muttered.

“*Huh..?*” Berlioz uttered, before bursting into laughter, the ground *quaking* due to the sheer loudness of his voice, “*Gwahahahaha!* That’s a good one! I didn’t know you had a talent for comedy, child!” he exclaimed.

“I’m *totally* serious, sir...” she grumbled. Frigg frowned at Berlioz’s rudeness. The Allfather cleared his throat and went back to glaring at Freya.

“Hmph... anyway, you two managed to legitimately counter my Dragon’s Crest with it. I went easy on you with that technique, using the exact same amount of souls that your enemy, Ulrich, possesses.” the god stated. Freya’s ears *twitched* at the mention of the usurper’s name and Berlioz noticed it. “Yes... you want to kill him for what he’s done to your friends, don’t you?” he said with an unnerving, murderous grin.

“I’m not interested in vengeance, sir. I just want to stop him before he starts a war.” the dragoon

replied, unsure about how truthful her answer really was.

“Well, here’s my offer: I want that rat dead as much as you do, but you lack the strength to take on his *Crest’s* power on your own. Even if I *despise* him, I can’t allow my chosen Spear to be a weakling like yourself.” Berlioz said before standing up, summoning his weapon back to his hand, “That can be helped, though. You have the potential to become an even greater warrior than *Athelric* himself... *if* you are willing to do what’s necessary to attain such power.”

Freya’s thought processes went hectic when she considered the prospect of becoming a Spear of Berlioz. For starters, she had never truly liked the god, but now she hated him with a passion: turning into his top enforcer was the exact opposite of what she wanted to do with her life. Besides, defeating Ulrich after gaining Berlioz’s favor meant that the Crescent bloodline would become *royalty*, which was already a big problem on its own, even before taking into account that she was...

“*Ughhh...*” she grumbled, thinking about the power void that she would probably leave behind after passing away if she followed through with this

plan. However, if she succeeded, she could put an end to Ulrich's machinations once and for all, preventing any further bloodshed until she figured out what to do next.

"Well, what will you do?" Berlioz inquired.

"I..." Freya stammered, her very *fate* depending on her answer, "I..."

"My patience has a limit, child..." the god snarled.

"I'll... do it." she sighed.

"*Good...*" the Allfather said. He then rested his blade upon Freya's shoulder. "Open the Box and follow the Obsidian Star to my... *bastard son's* domain. Travel by airship and don't bother with maps, just keep going in the same direction and *he* will find you. I'm sure he will be overjoyed to see you again, for you have already killed him once."

Freya gulped. Of course she had to go visit *that* demi-god.

"Train with him until you unlock your full potential and challenge me when he deems you ready. You have three months. If you don't make it to Gizamaluke's hideout within that time limit, I will

consider our agreement null and void. You better hide under a rock or something if that happens, because if I see you again, I will *destroy* you. Am I clear, girl?”

“Yes, sir.” she replied.

“Good... here is a little reward for surviving my test and a reminder of the oath you took.” Berlioz said, bestowing upon her the dubious honor of divine knighthood. His weapon started radiating a strange purple light and Freya’s *Crest* reacted to it with its own glow, “A taste of the power that I’ll grant you if you prove yourself worthy of serving me.”

Raw magic started flowing through the dragoon’s veins, heightening her senses even further. She didn’t know why, but she felt truly *unstoppable* now.

“If you have any questions, you better ask them now.” the Allfather said.

“I have two questions, sir.” Freya said, “First: how long does it take to reach Master Gizamaluke’s domain by airship from Alexandria?”

“You should be able to reach it in a day and a half at most with one of the newest ships.” the god stated.

“Great. Second question: is there any way I can better prepare myself for Master Gizamaluke’s training?”

“Yes: get ready to die.” Berlioz dryly replied, sending shivers down the burmecians’ spines, “You won’t be able to outlive our next encounter should mortal ties still burden you by then.”

His brutal answer made Freya’s heart *sink*. A nearby splash of red caught her attention: a batch of her mother’s tulips had somehow survived the battle. The sheer irony of it made her smile: like them, she had only delayed the inevitable until the end of spring.

“I understand.” she replied, raising her head to look Berlioz in the eye. “May I start tying up loose ends by spending a moment with my family, sir?”

“*Hmph...* permission granted.” the Allfather conceded, “Just don’t waste too much of my time, mortal.”

Having said that, Berlioz vanished into thin air, the skies clearing after his departure. Freya stood up and turned around, offering her loved ones the warmest smile she could muster. They lost no time

in embracing her tightly, reveling in the chance of resuming their violently interrupted reunion.

“I hope you still like lemon tea with lots of honey, darling...” Frigg whispered in her daughter’s ear.

“Of course I do, mom.” Freya answered, resting her muzzle on her mother’s shoulder.

11. Fallout

“In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.”

— Albert Camus

“Please, be in the lab... please, be in the lab...” Zidane repeated as he pushed a big blue button on a strange terran machine. Despite Gaia’s relative lack of refined materials and energy sources, Mikoto had managed to jury-rig a crude transoceanic communications system using parts salvaged from the Invincible. It was light years away from the extremely advanced tech of her homeworld, but it worked well enough.

“*Hello? Zidane, is that you?*” Mikoto said through the brass speakers that Regent Cid had installed in the recently inaugurated Royal Communications Room.

“Yes! Hi there, lil sis! How’s it going?” the king joyfully answered.

“I’m fine, thanks. Working, as usual. What about you? Has little Tot shown any signs of..?”

“Nope! He’s okay, healthy as his dad!” Zidane blurted out, trying to avoid *that particular subject*.

“Wonderful! I’m glad to know that he’s a success.”

“Oh, c’mon! You know it gives me the creeps when you start talking about him like he’s some sort of science project...” Zidane complained, disturbed by her cold, technical outlook on life.

“Sorry, brother... I guess my speech patterns still need improvement...” she immediately apologized.

“Don’t worry, I know you meant no harm. Speaking of harm, I have some very bad news...”

“Huh? What happened? Are you alright?” she worriedly asked him.

“Do you remember when you tried to... uh... *extend* Vivi’s lifespan by charging his *soul core* with that weird machine of yours?”

“Yes... poor thing. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it seems that someone has managed to crudely replicate the device that gave him life and

the implications of it are freaking me out.”

“*What..? That’s impossible!*” Mikoto muttered, flabbergasted, “The *soul core* was *bleeding edge* terran technology when Bran Bal was destroyed! A world like Gaia should not be able to produce one!”

“Well, a Burmecian soldier just brought me one... and it seems to have been mass-produced to boot,” the king explained, his voice tinged with fear.

“... *Does it have..?*”

“A crystallized soul, yeah.”

Mikoto went silent for a moment.

“*That is completely unacceptable! It violates every single point of the Declaration of Black Mage Rights!*” she exploded.

“Not to mention that the soul inside this thing is definitely *not* where it should be...” Zidane deadpanned. No matter how much progress she had made, his little sister still had trouble getting her priorities in order.

“*I’ll be there tomorrow. Hide it, don’t let anyone steal it from you. Has that soldier told you what kind of vessel was it powering?*”

“Judging by his sketches, it belonged to some sort of mechanical *Black Waltz knock-off*. Must be an offshoot of the original project or something.”

“Somebody must be producing them... someone with ties to Kuja and access to a cache of his technology that we didn’t know about.”

“That would be logical since these things seem to come from Treno. I knew those guys were bastards, but this time their asshole level is completely off the charts,” the king stated.

Mikoto went quiet for a moment.

“... In your place, I’d find out who is manufacturing them and I’d send a team into their headquarters to gather evidence of their crimes. If you exposed them in front of the entire Mist Continent, they’d have no choice but to shut down their operations,” she suggested, making his brother raise his eyebrows in astonishment. He remained in stunned silence for a moment before bursting into laughter.

“I knew you would love the Sir Thomas Clancy collection I’ve sent you!” he exclaimed, “You’ve read them all, haven’t you?”

“... maybe,” Mikoto sheepishly answered.

“That’s my little sister!” Zidane said, clapping his hands in front of the microphone, “Actually I was thinking about doing something along those lines. I’ll contact Blank, see if his team is up to the task. Speaking about spies, I don’t know what to do with the Burmecian that I’ve mentioned earlier. He seems to be a decent guy, but he’s still a spy and it could all be a ruse to gain intel on what we know... any suggestions?”

“Hmm. I might be able to help you with that...”
Mikoto answered.

“Really? Oh, you’re gonna use one of those cool mind-reading tricks of yours?” Zidane inquired.

“Exactly. Let me talk to him tomorrow. I’ll determine if it’s safe to let him go,” his sister asserted.

“Thank you for everything, Miko! I miss you a lot!” the king exclaimed.

“I miss you too, Zidane. I’ll be in Alexandria with my tools tomorrow. Take care of yourself, okay?”

“I will. Take care of yourself too. Love you!”

“... *Love you too*,” Mikoto shyly replied before logging out.

Tired, but determined, Garnet watched over her unconscious friend. She was sitting on a wooden chair with a cup of tea and an oil lamp as her only companions. Next to her, Freya slept peacefully with a smile on her lips. Every once in a while, the queen checked if the Burmecian was still breathing and resumed her post when she was sure that her chest heaved steadily.

Zidane opened the door slowly, wincing at the loud creaking sound it made.

“Could you contact Mikoto?” Garnet whispered.

“Yes. She’ll be here tomorrow to take a look at the *core*.” the genome answered while he sat alongside his wife, “How is she doing?”

“She seems to be fine, but I’m scared, Zid... what if she never wakes up? I couldn’t bear something like that...” Garnet muttered, seeking comfort in her husband’s arms.

“She’ll be okay, I’m sure of it,” Zidane lied, trying to reassure his wife despite sharing her fears

himself, “If there is someone capable of surviving *anything* that Gaia can possibly throw at her, it’s Freya.”

Garnet sobbed quietly, her face buried in Zidane’s chest. He kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair until she calmed down.

“I’m going to see if I can contact uncle Cid. He needs to know about all this,” the queen said, wiping her eyes before kissing the genome, “I love you so much, Zid... I don’t know how I’d deal with all this without you.”

“You’d surely find a way. You’re awesome, you know?” he answered, stealing a last kiss before she stood up.

“I don’t want to find out if I could... I’ll be back in a minute, if something happens, send Adelbert.” Garnet said before leaving the guest room.

Zidane remained quiet in his seat, thinking about everything that had happened in less than a week. The alleyway massacre, Puck’s death, now this... it was way too much to process. He stared at his lifelong friend for a while, hoping that the bad feeling he had about her future was wrong. “*At least she seems to be happy...*” he thought.

Freya opened her eyes, finding herself once again in the royal guest room. To be sure, she turned around and looked out the window. Effectively, she was back in Alexandria.

“*Was it all a dream..?*” she wondered, remembering her recent experiences in *Fólkvangr*. Somehow, she could feel that Frigg and Kain were still with her, smiling.

Loud snoring interrupted her train of thought.

“Who’s there?” she squeaked, startled by the sound. Sitting on his chair, Zidane slept with his mouth wide open and his head comically tilted back. Garnet was sitting next to him, quietly sleeping on his shoulder. “*How does she manage to sleep with all that noise..?*” the Burmecian thought, trying not to laugh.

“Huh..?” the queen mumbled, awakened by the dragoon’s voice. ‘*Freya..?*’ she muttered before grabbing Zidane’s shoulder and gently shaking him, “Zid, look! Freya is awake!”

“*Hngh... mmh..?*” the genome mumbled, blinking dumbly for a moment before springing back to life like a jack-in-the-box. “*Well, I’ll be damned! Look*

who's back with us!" he exclaimed, excitedly squeezing Garnet's hand.

"Hello, guys..." Freya said with a big smile. Garnet lost no time in hugging her tightly, catching the Burmecian off-guard.

"We were so scared! I'm so happy to see you awake!" she exclaimed. It took Freya a couple of seconds and a bewildered glance at Zidane to overcome her respect for the queen's authority and hug her back.

"Thank you... I wasn't going to leave you alone with all this," the dragoon said.

"The ultimate badass on Gaia is challenged to a deathmatch by a freaking *god of war* and she kicks his ass because she doesn't want to abandon her friends. Holy shit, woman, that's both cute *and* corny as hell!" the king quipped, making Freya and Garnet chuckle.

"You're one to talk about corny motivations..." the Burmecian shot back with a smug smirk.

"*Touché*," Zidane answered, clutching his heart as if it had been pierced by a sword, "Hey, Rusty! Freya's awake!" he shouted, prompting Garnet to shush him.

Steiner immediately barged into the room crying like a big, dumb child.

“Lady Freya! I thought... I thought you were going to... *Bwaaaaah!*” he sobbed, dramatically kneeling beside her bed.

“Oh... hello, Adelbert...” the dragoon muttered, awkwardly patting his helmet in a misguided attempt to calm him down.

“Rusty, come on! If you keep getting snot all over her she’ll get tetanus or something..!” Zidane exclaimed, pulling the musclebound knight back, “Hey Freya! Please tell me that you said a cool one-liner when you kicked that motherfucker into space!”

“Well... about that...” the Burmecian stammered, “I didn’t actually *beat* him...”

Everyone went silent for a moment.

“What do you mean..?” Garnet asked, already knowing that she wouldn’t like the answer.

“Let’s just say that Berlioz let me off the hook for now...” Freya replied, much to everyone’s confusion.

“But *Wulfweird* said that you’d only wake up if you won the fight!” Zidane exclaimed.

“It turns out that I’ve impressed Berlioz enough for him to temporarily spare my life, but he will... well, *kill me* if I don’t begin my *Spear* training soon,” the Burmecian explained.

“Then we’ll kick his ass first!” Zidane furiously spat, making everyone turn their heads in his direction, “I don’t know about you, guys, but I’ve had enough of all this Berlioz business and I’m *not* gonna stand idly by while this entitled asshole threatens her like that!”

“Zidane...” Freya said, smiling at the rabid genome, “I appreciate your concern, but you need not worry about me, for I’ve agreed to those terms of my own accord...”

“What?!” Garnet squeaked, “Why would you do something like that?!”

“Because if I managed to become the new *Spear* of Berlioz, we could prevent the war from happening altogether!” the Burmecian replied.

“Woman, listen to yourself! You’re selling your soul to a guy that’s threatening to kill you if you

disobey him! And without guarantees of any kind, to top it off!” Zidane exclaimed on the verge of yelling.

“Zidane, think of all the lives we will save if this works! We could defeat Ulrich, disband his army and restore peace to the continent! Think of all the cherry tree hills that we could build together!” Freya answered, raising her own volume too.

“The risk is *not* worth it!” The king *exploded*, making his friend shrink in her place, “What if Berlioz forces you to fight us in the name of who knows what whim of his?! Have you considered the possibility of all this mess being **HIS** idea? What if *he’s* the mastermind behind Ulrich’s crimes and just sent you the box to replace him with a stronger queen?! Motherfucker has been scheming for *hundreds of years* and, as far as I know, he just let his last *Spear* be horribly murdered without even moving a finger to save him!”

“Zid, calm down please! You’re overreacting!” Garnet hissed.

“I’m not overreacting, Dag! We already were knee-deep in shit before Freya invited the fucking *god of murder* to the party!” the genome shot back, blinking away tears. He then shifted his attention to the Burmecian once again, “Why Freya? Why do

you need to throw your life away like this when you could simply let us help you?”

“Zidane! Shut up this instant!” the queen blew up at him, scaring the wits out of everyone in the room, “You’re being *incredibly* unfair to her! What if she’s being threatened into becoming his servant?! Have you even considered the possibility of Berlioz forcing her to *pretend* that she’s okay with this?!”

“No, Garnet... he’s right...” Freya stammered, her lower lip trembling so much that she had trouble talking, “*I’m sorry...*”

Neither Garnet or Steiner had ever heard it, but Zidane knew full well that whenever she spoke with that broken voice, it was because she had finally hit rock bottom.

“Oh, *fuck...*” the genome muttered, burying his face in his hands, “I’m sorry, Freya... I’m so sorry... I really went too far this time.”

“No... you’re right, monkey-tail...” the Burmecian croaked, “I should have declined his offer, even if he took my life for doing so... I didn’t think he could use me to hurt you...” she said, hiding her shame behind her silver bangs.

“That’s not going to happen, Freya. Not even in a million years.” Garnet intervened, lovingly holding her, “We’ll find a way to make things right.”

“Can you possibly forgive me for all I’ve done..?” the Burmecian stammered while the queen stroked her hair.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Lady Freya.” Steiner intervened, “You have relinquished your own soul to protect us all. Besides, we still don’t know if what you did was a mistake. Maybe something good can come out of this.”

Zidane blankly stared at the Pluto knight, feeling like the biggest jerk ever.

“Maybe you’re right, Steiner...” the genome conceded, before shifting his attention back to the burmecian, “Freya... can you forgive me for being a complete asshole? I didn’t mean what I said, I was just...”

“... worried, I know...” the dragoon muttered, completing his sentence. She left Garnet’s embrace and sat upright, offering her old friend an apologetic smile.

“... dragon pals?” she asked.

Zidane chuckled and smiled back.

“Yeah. Dragon pals.”

12. Rose of May

“Hello, Sir Wulfweard...” Zidane said, carefully cracking the door of the dragoon’s cell open. He had been taken to one of the towers instead of the dungeon and was being held prisoner in a room as luxurious as it was inescapable, for its thick walls were reinforced with powerful magical barriers.

“Greetings, Your Royal Highness...” the old burmecian answered without even looking at him. He was sitting on the floor, calmly meditating under a thin ray of moonlight. “How is *Cherry*? Is she still unconscious?”

“Luckily, she’s awake. The Trial is over.” Zidane replied.

Wulfweard stood up and turned around. Even in the darkness of night, Zidane could discern the relieved expression on his wrinkled face.

“I’ve always known that her spirit harbored the seed of greatness. Thank you for telling me, sir, I’m glad to know that she’s safe.” the old warrior said, offering the king a respectful bow.

“Something went wrong along the way, however...” Zidane added, prompting Wulfweard to stare blankly at him.

“What happened, sir? Is she hurt in any way?” the soldier worriedly inquired.

“*Hmm... his concern seems to be genuine...*” the genome thought before answering his question, “Not for the moment. Berlioz wants to appoint her as his new Spear, but he wants a second duel before giving her the job.”

“A second duel..?” the veteran warrior uttered in disbelief, “If I’m correct, this is a first in the entirety of burmecian history...”

“Any ideas about why is he doing all this?” Zidane asked.

“Hmm... maybe it has to do with her status as a world savior.” Wulfweard proposed, stroking his whiskers, “The Allfather has always favored heroes, and Freya is one of the greatest living champions of our race. I’m inclined to think that he despises Ulrich’s shameful ways and views her as a better embodiment of his beliefs. *Hmph... how ironic...*”

“Huh? What do you mean?” the genome immediately inquired.

“I don’t want to bore you with theology, sir, so I’ll sum it up to the best of my ability. Our pantheon has two main deities: Father Berlioz and Mother Reis. They have been locked in a tense standoff ever since the Allfather’s ascension to godhood due to their vastly different philosophies and principles. Berlioz’s cult is prevalent among burmecians, while Reis ended up becoming the favored deity of cleyrans until the destruction of their civilization.”

Cleyra... how to forget about Odin’s final charge and the subsequent obliteration of the doomed citadel. Zidane felt that if he closed his eyes, he would see the eidolon of annihilation emerging once again from his dark dimension.

“... Like her mother and unlike most burmecians, Freya has always relied primarily on the goddess’ miracles and teachings, despite having acquired the Mark of the Dragonslayer, the most important sacrament of the Allfather’s religion.” Wulfweard explained, “Whereas the Path of Berlioz is about defeating powerful foes in glorious combat to grow stronger, the Path of Reis emphasizes chivalry, compassion and protecting the weak.”

“I guess that makes her an odd champion choice for Berlioz, am I right?” Zidane commented.

“Absolutely. However, he must not want the most famous dragoon alive to be aligned with *Reis* and not with him.” the soldier concluded.

“Geez... even the gods can be petty jerks.” the king opined.

“When is the rematch going to take place, sir?” the dragoon asked, letting the genome’s rude remark slide.

Zidane hesitated to answer. Wulfweard, an experienced spy himself, immediately picked up on it.

“You are still suspicious of me.” he said with a subtly challenging tone.

“Yes. I’m sorry to keep you here and for... you know... *freaking out* when the Trial started, but your presence in Alexandria is far too convenient and you almost got a *very* dear friend of mine killed, who also happens to be at the top of your regent’s black list.” the king retorted.

The burmecian glared at him, outraged.

“You insult me! I’m many things, but I’m not a traitor! I would never sell out a student of mine like that!” he exclaimed.

“C’mon, Wulf, we’re both professional liars. You know that sentimentalism is not gonna get you anywhere.” Zidane retorted.

“Alright... what do I need to do to quell your fears, sir?” the dragoon asked, visibly irritated.

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” the king replied, folding his arms. “I’ll ask you one thing. Do it and not only I’ll let you go: I’ll give you five million gil as a token of gratitude for warning us about Ulrich’s army.”

“I’m not interested in your money, but I appreciate your generosity nevertheless. What is this *task* you need me to perform, sir?” Wulfweard inquired.

“Convince my interrogation specialist of your innocence. No torture, no pain, just talking. Simple as that.”

“Alright then, where is he?” the burmecian agreed.

“Tomorrow. Well, *today* in fact. She’s not here yet.” Zidane clarified. Sir Wulfweard’s ears twitched almost imperceptibly in response to his answer, but the genome detected the gesture and frowned, knowing from experience what it meant.

“Something’s worrying you... do you need to be somewhere else soon?”

The veteran soldier chuckled.

“I have to say that I’ve underestimated you, sir.” he said, “I see now that your reputation is well deserved, indeed.”

Zidane silently stared into the burmecian’s eyes for a moment.

“Who are you, Wulfweard? Who are you working for? Why are you doing all this?” he inquired.

The dragoon shrugged and sat down again with his back turned to the king.

“I’ve already told you that, and Cherry can attest to my words.” he calmly replied, “I’m an old friend of Puck’s family and I wish to prevent the war from happening as much as you do. If you still don’t believe me, I’ll just sit here until the interrogator arrives.”

“Alright. There’s water over there and you can eat all the fruit you want from the table. Oh, and if *nature calls*, that chair over there is...” Zidane explained.

“I’m well aware of its function, sir. Thank you.” the knight stated, not bothering to open his eyes.

“Knock the door if you need something. I’ll come back whenever my specialist arrives.” the king said, turning to leave.

“... If I were you, I would *severely* punish the eastern wall guards for their ineptitude.” Wulfweard suggested.

“Thanks, Wulf... I sure hope we get to trust each other.” the genome replied, closing the door behind him.

That morning, little Tot woke up with lots of energy. He jumped off his bed and got dressed, tucking his tail inside his loose pants as his father had taught him to do and wrapping it around his waist like a furry belt of sorts.

He looked out the window, enjoying the warmth of the rising sun on his skin; it was *definitely* the perfect day to go out and play.

The young prince slowly cracked the door of his room open and peeked outside. He was surprised to

see none other than Lady Beatrix standing guard next to his dormitory.

“Good morning, Your Royal Highness.” the general greeted him with a friendly smile.

“G-good morning, Lady Beatrix!” Tot stuttered. Maybe it was the eyepatch, maybe it was her deadly presence, he didn’t know why, but he couldn’t help feeling intimidated by the graying knight.

“I know what you were planning to do, sir, but just for today I can’t allow it.” the seasoned warrior explained.

“Oh, *man...*” Tot muttered.

“Your presence is requested in the royal bedroom, sir. Your parents have decided to have breakfast there.” Beatrix stated. “After that, I’ll escort you to the library for your daily lesson.”

“*Okay...*” the prince mumbled, reluctantly obeying Beatrix’s orders.

The general gestured to a nearby couple of maids, indicating that the prince’s room was ready for cleanup.

“*What’s going on..?*” the boy wondered, knocking on his parents’ door.

Queen Garnet peeked outside and smiled when she saw her son standing on her doorstep.

“Good morning, darling!” she greeted him, trying to sound enthusiastic despite the dark circles under her eyes.

“Hi, mom...” Tot replied, immediately realizing that something was off, “Are you alright? You look *really* tired...”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s okay.” she answered, letting out a yawn, “Come in, dear, we were waiting for you.”

The queen nodded to Beatrix and let the young prince in, closing the door behind him. The general sighed when she found herself alone with her thoughts once again.

“*Hmm... my shift is almost over...*” the alexandrian general muttered when she was sure that nobody was listening, massaging her sore neck.

“H-hello, *Bea...*” Steiner stuttered, startling her. He could be very sneaky when he wanted to, despite his loudly clanking armor.

“Oh... hello, Adelbert.” she answered quietly.

“Uhh...” the muscular soldier mumbled, fidgeting with his fingers, “A-any news about Ulrich..?”

“I’m sorry about yesterday.” the general replied, cutting straight to the chase. The Pluto knight sighed and scratched his nape.

“I’m sorry too, my love.” Steiner added, “I didn’t know how to react and froze up like a big coward...”

Beatrix stared at her husband and offered him a sad smile.

“It wasn’t your fault, Adelbert. I wouldn’t have known what to say either, especially considering that she was right about me... about what I did.” she said, gently caressing Steiner’s cheek “It was really unfair of me to get angry at you for that.”

The burly knight’s throat tightened when he saw the unfathomable sorrow in his wife’s eyes. Twenty years of devout love hadn’t been enough to help her move on, and her grief had grown deeper every day. He felt like she was slowly slipping through his fingers, like sand in the wind.

“We’ve already talked about this! You were under strict orders from the queen..!” Steiner blurted out.

“So were you.” she interrupted him, “That’s the difference between us. That’s why I admire you. You are a true hero, Adelbert. I am nothing but a tool.”

He was left speechless, powerless after such a statement.

“I believe your shift begins now.” the general said, walking past him. “I’ll be back in an hour to pick up Tot. If something bad happens, you know where to find me.”

Adelbert Steiner watched his wife disappear downstairs, unable to articulate what he wanted to tell her.

“We’re no longer tools of anyone...” he muttered when she was well out of earshot.

Beatrix decided to wind down a bit the only way she knew: by going to the training room. She was about to enter when an unexpected sound caught her attention.

“Huh..?” she muttered, putting an ear against the wooden gate: somebody was inside.

The general cracked the door open and sighed when she encountered the last person she wanted to see that day.

“Good morning, Lady Crescent...” she reluctantly said.

Freya was doing sit-ups while hanging upside down from a bar on the ceiling. The sight vaguely reminded Beatrix of Zidane in his younger days.

“Oh. It’s you. Hello.” the dragoon coldly replied, resuming her routine immediately after.

The swordswoman turned to leave and stood silently with her hand on the doorknob for a few seconds.

“Say, dragon knight...” she uttered, her heart pounding in her chest.

“What do you want?” the burmecian rudely asked.

“Do you still know your way around a polearm?” the general inquired, looking at Freya over her shoulder.

The dragoon remained still for a moment before letting herself fall, spinning mid-air like a cat and gracefully landing on her feet. Without a single

word, she picked up a quarterstaff from the weapons rack and stepped into the square mat intended for sparring. Beatrix chose a wooden longsword instead and stared calmly into her opponent's fierce emerald eyes.

"Are you looking to avenge your wounded pride?" Freya growled, glaring daggers at the woman that had ruined her life two decades ago.

"No. I just want to talk." the general answered, her voice unexpectedly tinged with sorrow.

"Why the weapons, then?" the burmecian asked, raising an eyebrow.

"We are warriors, aren't we?" Beatrix answered, "How else could I properly show you my respect? Besides, it will be more... cathartic this way, don't you think?"

"You're ridiculous, warmongering hag." Freya snarled, "No matter how powerful you are, you'll never be a warrior. You are but a mere soldier."

Having said those words, the dragoon assumed a fighting stance. Beatrix raised her blade, accepting the challenge. She suddenly lunged forward, her speed and ferocity definitely not matching her wrinkled, aging body.

“*So fast..!*” Freya thought as the general stepped into striking range. Beatrix swung her weapon thrice in quick succession, aiming for Freya’s head, liver and left wrist. Each attack was so monstrously potent that any lesser warrior would have been knocked down flat by the very first blow, provided that it didn’t outright kill them. The dragoon instinctively parried the first two slashes and struck Beatrix’s weapon so hard while countering the third one that she broke her training sword in two, the upper half exploding in a shower of splinters when it hit the stone ceiling.

“Impressive...” the general commented, staring at her ruined blade. She then slowly walked back to the weapons rack to pick up another sword. Freya was flabbergasted by the almost suicidal calm with which she had turned her back on her after having been disarmed like that.

“I want you to know...” the old swordswoman said, raising her blade once again, “... that for twenty years I’ve had nothing but nightmares, *night after night.*”

Without giving Freya time to process her words, Beatrix closed the gap between them at ridiculous speed, cutting the dragoon’s already damaged staff

in two with a rising strike of her blade, barely missing her face. With the fluidity of a wind current, she turned the momentum of her upwards attack into an overhead slash that would have put the burmecian to sleep if she hadn't stopped it using both halves of her broken polearm.

“Oh, you’ve gotten better!” the general lauded her, realizing that her weapon was effectively trapped and she didn’t have the strength to free it.

“You have no idea...” Freya answered, kicking the elderly fencer in the stomach and accidentally sending her flying across their improvised ring.

“*What... is this power..?!*” Beatrix thought before landing on her back and banging her head on the matted floor with a loud thud.

“*Oh, no..!*” Freya mumbled, horrified, when she saw her opponent lying motionless on the ground; it seemed that even without further magical enhancements, her newfound strength was too dangerous to use recklessly.

Much to the burmecian’s relief, Beatrix coughed and rose to her feet. No mere human could or should have stood up after receiving such a spine-shattering

blow, but the general wasn't revered as the mightiest warrior on Gaia for nothing.

"Heh... heh... I'd give anything to be in my prime right now." the swordswoman wheezed, preparing herself for round three, "Our battle would be *legendary...*"

"Stop it, Beatrix. This fight is over." Freya said, dropping the remains of her staff.

The alexandrian general blinked twice in utter disbelief.

"Heh... hehehe..." Beatrix chuckled. She supported herself on her sword and kneeled to catch her breath, "I can't believe you're pitying *me...*"

"No. I'm just being reasonable." the dragoon replied, walking towards the general, "We can't risk getting seriously injured at a time like this."

Beatrix remained silent for a moment.

"... You should have kicked me harder." she whispered.

"Huh..?" Freya uttered, taken aback by her statement.

“If you are capable of winding me with a single strike, then this kingdom no longer needs my sword...” the general elaborated.

“You’re wrong.” the dragoon interrupted her, “Your skills and experience are more necessary than ever right now.”

“*What..?*” the paladin mumbled, raising her eyebrows. Was the burmecian... *encouraging her?*

Freya gently placed her hand over Beatrix’s head, taking her by surprise.

“Help us preserve the frail peace that we’ve striven so hard to achieve.” the dragoon said, “That’s how you shall redeem yourself.”

Having said those words, she muttered a prayer to Reis. The goddess seemed to hesitate for a moment before manifesting herself in the form of a mystical breeze that mended the general’s battered body, making her feel ten years younger.

“Stand up, Beatrix of Alexandria, for Mother Reis has decided to give you a second chance.” the burmecian said, “Don’t let it go to waste.”

The paladin was left speechless. She quietly stared as Freya picked up her belongings and left the

room.

“I swear I won’t...” she whispered.

13. A Shadow from the Past

Knock, knock, knock.

The jailer slid open the cell door's peephole.

"Lady Freya, do you need something?" the soldier asked when she met the dragoon's gaze.

"I'm ready to leave, Lena." the burmecian replied.

"Alright, stand clear of the door, please."

Freya complied and the knight disabled the magic glyph that kept the room sealed.

"Stay calm, Cherry, everything will be fine..." Sir Wulfweard reassured her before resuming his meditation.

"I sure hope so..." his former student said, nodding to him, "I'll be back soon, sir. Please, hold on a little longer."

"Alright, you can leave now." the guard said, letting her out. She then activated the barrier, sealing the chamber again.

Freya sighed and resignedly went down the tower's stairs. Despite being confident in Mikoto's lie detection skills, she couldn't help feeling bad about her old teacher's imprisonment, however comfortable it was. She began absentmindedly walking down the second floor hallway, so caught up in her thoughts that she failed to notice that Zidane was there, waiting for her.

"It's not that we don't trust your judgement, you know?" the genome said, interrupting the burmecian's contemplation, "It's just that too many lives ride on every decision we make. We need to be certain about his innocence."

She stopped and sighed before turning around.

"I understand how delicate this situation is." the dragoon answered, brushing aside her platinum bangs, "However... I know I'm definitely *not* an authority on the subject, but what I told you earlier still stands: you need to start trusting more in your friends."

"You're right. I've been kind of... *overbearing* these days." the genome sheepishly admitted, abandoning his spot and approaching her, "Mind if I walk with you?"

“Of course not, dummy.” she replied with a lopsided smile, waiting for him to catch up.

Freya realized as they went that it had been an eternity since the last time she had spent more than two days with her Mist War comrades. Her visits to Alexandria had grown sparser across the years and she had almost stopped coming altogether once Puck offered her a position in the Royal Guard. Just walking in silence with her oldest remaining friend was nice for a change, as if they had never got separated by their respective lifestyles and responsibilities. She briefly fantasized about escaping to a less complicated universe; one in which she got to wander aimlessly again, drinking, sight-seeing, picking up fights with the local wildlife and sleeping under the boundless skies of the countryside. *Gods*, did she miss traveling without a care in the world.

“I just did the hardest thing ever...” Zidane said, completely out of the blue.

“Huh? What happened?” Freya asked.

“Garnet and I had a talk with *Lil’ Tot*... we told him about our plan.”

“What plan?” the dragoon inquired, raising an eyebrow.

“We’re not going to Puck’s funeral together...” the king replied, “Dagger is leaving me here in case... *something goes wrong.*”

Freya stopped dead on her tracks.

“Is she gonna be alright?” the burmecian squeaked with a shocked expression on her face, “Please tell me that she can still summon her eidolons!”

“Yeah... Dag still has the moves.” Zidane affirmed, “If Ulrich decides to whip out his Dragon’s Crest, he’s gonna get a faceful of *kaboom...* or at least that’s what I hope.”

The dragon knight winced at the idea of a showdown between the summoner and the dragonslayer. She had serious doubts about Garnet’s chances against a lightning fast killer like the *usurper*: if she fought him one-on-one without any kind of field advantage, she would be dead before she could complete her first incantation.

“... Besides, an entire company of our best soldiers, *and Rusty*, are gonna be with her at all times.” the king added, mostly trying to convince

himself about how safe his wife would be with them.

Freya sighed: it still wasn't an ideal match-up. For starters, pitting common soldiers against Ulrich was like sending rabbits to hunt a fox. Steiner's *sword arts* could certainly hold the dragonslayer at bay for a while, but if he didn't manage to kill him *fast*, the sheer versatility of the Dragon's Crest would allow the chancellor to take out Garnet in a blink while staying out of the Pluto knight's reach.

"Oh, I almost forgot... last night Dag managed to contact Cid. He's suspecting an ambush too, so he tried to force Eiko to stay at home. Guess what, *it didn't work*." Zidane stated.

Those were *excellent news*, the dragoon thought. The princess of Lindblum's endless stream of white magic was exactly what they needed to counter the mark's strengths and overwhelm Ulrich's defenses. The usurper would be in for a *nasty* surprise if his arrogance made him take on the three of them at once.

"What do you think, Freya?" the genome asked, seeking reassurance despite knowing the answer to his question, "Is Ulrich crazy enough to attempt something during the ceremony?"

The burmecian gulped.

“Look, I’m not going to lie to you, Zidane... I think that his most dangerous trait is his unpredictability.” she answered, resting a comforting hand over his shoulder, “The best we can do now is to help our friends prepare for the meeting and gather every piece of information we can to give them an edge. We’re blindly stumbling in the dark and that needs to change *soon*.”

“I hate to admit it, but I’m scared out of my mind...” the king confessed, “I dunno what I’d do if something happened to them...”

“They are the best Gaia has to offer, monkey boy.” the burmecian affirmed with a confident smile, “If I believe in them, and I’m the pessimist here, so should you.”

Zidane sighed and gently patted the back of her hand. He suddenly frowned and sniffed a couple times, as if detecting a strange scent in the air.

“Huh? What’s wrong?” the dragon knight inquired and started alarmedly sniffing around.

The genome seemed to follow an invisible trail to the burmecian’s hand and immediately burst into laughter when he understood what he was smelling.

“*Have you lost your mind?*” Freya squeaked, recoiling in confusion.

“I know you’re positively covered in hair, but that’s just *too much shampoo*, woman!” Zidane chuckled, “You’ve just had *the* most expensive bath in Gaia’s history!”

The burmecian’s ears immediately glowed red and she looked aside, blushing furiously beneath her pale fur.

“I couldn’t resist, *okay?* That thing was just too good...” she exclaimed, folding her arms, “At least I don’t smell like a chimp’s butt!”

“I agree! It’s more like chamomile and honey, with a subtle hint of *wet rat*.” he retorted, imitating the gestures of a perfume *connoisseur*.

“Why, you little..!” she shrieked, balling up her fists before snorting with laughter, “*Pffft, gwahahaha!*”

The king snorted too and they chortled uncontrollably for a while. It was just like the good old times.

“*Ahhh... thank you, Freya. I needed this badly.*” the genome said with a goofy grin when they

managed to calm down, “Wanna go grab a bite? I’m starving!”

Her tummy replied with a loud growl, prompting both friends to blankly stare at it.

“I guess that’s a yes!” Zidane exclaimed triumphantly, much to the dragon knight’s chagrin.

“*Your Majesty!*” Breireicht of the Pluto knights suddenly yelled from the other end of the corridor, “*Lady Mikoto has arrived to the castle!*”

“*What?!* So fast?!” Zidane blurted out in shock, “Where is she?”

“Queen Garnet is personally escorting her to her cabinet, sir.” The soldier replied, “She’s sent me to find you two, in fact.”

Zidane and Freya glanced at each other.

“Looks like lunch will have to wait...” the genome said, scratching the back of his head.

“So, how are the genomes doing, Mikoto?” Garnet inquired with a fascinated expression,

“Zidane told me that they had adapted to Gaia most admirably!”

“Biologically, yes. Culturally, not so much. Most of them have yet to develop true self-awareness, but the few exceptions give us hope for the future...” the blond scientist replied, making a brief pause to sip her tea. She then stared into her empty mug for a moment, looking almost disappointed, “Sorry for the interruption, but this is just too good to be true, how did you call it?”

“Oh, this is black tea with rose petals, orange peel and cinnamon, one of my favorite blends!” the queen exclaimed. She had always found Mikoto’s endless capacity for amazement deeply endearing. She was literally as curious as a monkey.

“I need to replicate this, share it with my people, perhaps if I take a few samples...” she mumbled, staring at the porcelain teapot while scratching her chin. Garnet held back a chuckle: despite their vastly different intellectual capacities, brother and sister were just as easily distracted and even shared the same mannerisms.

“You don’t need to do all that, sweetie, I’ll gladly give you the recipe.” the monarch said, winking at her.

“Oh... right... *thank you.*” Mikoto replied, mildly embarrassed.

Knock, knock, knock!

“Come in!” Garnet exclaimed.

Zidane entered the room, followed by Freya. “Hi there, Miko!” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

“Brother! It’s good to see you!” she excitedly greeted him. The queen stared at the girl, bemused by her unusual display of emotion; Zidane truly had the mysterious power of bringing out the best in others.

The king affectionately kissed the top of his younger sister’s head and she seemed to revel in the rare physical contact. It was no wonder that she appreciated him so much, Garnet thought, for the blond thief was one of the only people in Gaia that had openly cared for her from the very beginning.

“Hello, Garnet, Mikoto.” the dragon knight said, taking a bow.

“Hi, Freya. Please, sit down wherever you like. Do you want some tea?” the queen offered.

“*Absolutely.*” the burmecian eagerly answered, picking a spot near the table.

“Any news, Dag?” Zidane asked his wife while lazily sinking into a couch “Hey, thank you for receiving Miko, by the way. I had no idea she could cross the ocean in, what, ten hours?”

“*Thirteen*, to be precise.” the young scientist corrected him with a proud smile, “It’s a new world record!”

“That’s just crazy, girl.” the king commented before noticing a nearby plate full of sweets, “Ooo, biscuits...”

“Zidane, do you have the *soul core*? I’d like to examine it right away.” his sister said, picking up her leather bag from the ground and revealing a myriad of gadgets and tools.

“Here it is.” Garnet answered, putting the *brass heart* on the table. Mikoto drew a magnifying glass from her toolbox and spent a good moment studying every nook and ridge of the alien device.

“Hmph... even if it’s remarkably well made for a gaian machine, this is nothing but a crude, severely flawed imitation of a *true soul core*.” she said, showing the artifact to her friends, “Look at the shape of the crystal, it’s completely irregular and presents cracks and fractures that hint at a barbaric

production method. Whoever did this seems not to understand that to produce a stable soul stone you can't simply slaughter people and harvest their remains like some kind of butcher."

"Could you please tell us what's the difference between a stable and an unstable soul stone, Mikoto?" Garnet inquired, trying to remain focused despite the horrific nature of the golden machine.

"Well... Vivi, for example, was powered by such a beautifully crafted soul stone that he was psychologically and emotionally indistinguishable from a normal human being. To put it in simpler words, he was the first black mage to possess an authentic soul of his own." the monkey-tailed girl explained.

"And what would happen if we were to... uh... *install* this faulty core on an empty vessel?" Zidane asked.

"A crystal *this* defective would probably cause it to go on a pain-fueled rampage until someone managed to put it out of its misery." Mikoto stated, "The way a soul is harvested is what shapes the resulting crystal. This... *thing*... was created in a particularly *gruesome* fashion, and it shows."

“Does this man’s cruelty know no limits..?” Freya growled. She was so tense that she had unwittingly embedded her fingernails into her chair’s arms.

“Who are you talking about?” the scientist asked, completely unaware of Ulrich’s usurpation of the burmecian throne, “We don’t even know if we’re dealing with a man here...”

“Hold on a second...” Garnet said, opening her eyes so wide that Zidane thought they would pop out of their sockets, “We’re not dealing with a man... *Zid, we’re not dealing with a man!*” she yelled, scrambling for a nearby wooden chest.

“Uh... Dag, what are you talking about?” the king asked, craning his neck to try to see what his wife was looking for.

“Ah! Here they are!” the queen exclaimed, grabbing several rolls of parchment and scattering them all over the table, “The records of the Treno Rebellion!”

“Huh..?” the king mumbled, scratching his head in confusion until a terrifying realization dawned upon him, “Oh... *OH! OH, SHIT, YOU’RE RIGHT!*”

“*The Treno Rebellion?* But wasn’t that like sixteen years ago?” Freya inquired, raising her eyebrows.

“During the early days of the conflict, we had a particularly bloody run-in with a deadly enemy unit.” the queen explained, “They were outfitted with enchanted suits of armor that significantly enhanced their physical capacities.”

“Yeah... motherfuckers razed half a dozen alexandrian villages to the ground before we finally managed to take ’em down.” Zidane added, “Do you remember those strange breastplates we sent you, Miko?”

“Yeah... they were lined with a rather primitive mystical circuitry mesh.” the scientist recalled.

“Well, they weren’t primitive for us at the time.” her brother retorted, “Those bastards took too many innocent lives to count thanks to their superior technology.”

“The woman who designed those suits of armor is Treno’s current head of government. It can’t be a coincidence!” Garnet concluded, unrolling one of the scrolls and skimming over a list of merchant names.

“How was she called? *Vilma*? No... *Victoria*?”
Zidane muttered, repeatedly snapping his fingers.

“*Bishop.*” Garnet replied, “*Margaret Bishop.*”

14. The Partisans

“Are you ready, Miko?” Zidane asked before entering Sir Wulfweard’s cell.

“Just make sure he doesn’t try to kill me mid-session and we’ll be fine.” Mikoto replied, donning a metallic, monkey-themed mask.

“He wouldn’t do that... would he?” Garnet inquired, disturbed by the idea.

“Uh... are you sure this is a good idea, sir?” Beatrix intervened, worried for the genome siblings’ safety, “I can go with you if you want...”

“He won’t try to hurt anyone; you can rest assured of that!” Freya told them, dismissing their concerns with a wave of her hand.

“Yeah, don’t worry, Dag, I bet we’ll walk out of that room as *besties*.” the king quipped, struggling to tie one of his mythrill bracers.

“Hmph... I sure hope you do.” the dragoon muttered, grabbing his wrist and fastening the loose arm-guard with practiced efficiency, “I’ll be here in case I’m needed. Please, treat him gently; Sir

Wulfweard has always been a honorable man and a devoted protector of Burmecia, but he can be quite... *abrasive* when he feels disrespected.”

“Okay, Freya, I promise I’ll be nice.” Zidane replied, nodding to her, “Beatrix, could you please open the door?”

“Right away, sir.” the general answered, disabling the barrier and letting the genomes into the dimly lit room.

The first thing Zidane noticed was that that the burmecian had neither drunk nor eaten anything; in fact, the chamber seemed completely untouched, as if he had never been there.

“Back so soon, Your Majesty?” the old soldier greeted him. Zidane wondered if he had moved at all since his last visit. The dragoon calmly stood up and turned around with a grandfatherly smile, his wrinkled face wreathed in shadows.

“Good afternoon, Sir Wulfweard.” the king replied, “As promised, I’ve brought along Alexandria’s best interrogator. If she believes what you say, I believe what you say, that’s the deal.”

“Hmm... you two smell similar... family, perhaps?” the demi-rodent said with a knowing

smirk.

“Close, but no.” Mikoto dryly replied, “You have a remarkable olfactory capacity, nevertheless... I’ve always found your people fascinating.”

“Oh, thank you! It’s good to see someone likes us for a change.” the burmecian answered, courteously bringing three chairs to the middle of the room and taking one for himself, “Colonel Wulfweard Rolfsen. Nice to meet you.”

“Your name is an alias, isn’t it?” Mikoto replied, seating herself in front of him, “Well, I usually go by the code name ‘Professor’, deception expert, the pleasure is mine.”

Wulfweard smirked, amused by how precisely she had called his bluff.

“May I ask what’s the mask for, *Professor*? You don’t need to intimidate me to get me talking.” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, this? It’s an amplifying device I’ve designed and built myself. If we have a honest conversation, it will remain just a ridiculous facial decoration. However, I strongly discourage trying to deceive me while I have it on.”

“Hmm... interesting... In thirty-five years of service I’ve never seen one of those. I must admit I almost want to lie to you just to see what happens!” the burmecian joked, stroking his drooping whiskers.

“Well, you’ve just lied again, in fact.” the scientist retorted, “Are you quite done with your experiments?”

The former colonel reclined himself on his chair and flashed her a satisfied smile.

“Impressive. I could have used someone like you in my team back then...” he said, “I’ve served for forty-six years to be precise. I just don’t like admitting I’m *that* old in front of such a charming young lady.”

“Let’s get this started, shall we?” Mikoto said, completely ignoring his compliment, “Did you try to kill Freya Crescent?”

“No, and I never would.” the burmecian replied, this time in a dead serious tone, “She’s my student, my comrade in arms, my friend and my family’s friend. Her own mother asked me to protect her long ago, and I intend to keep my word.”

Zidane eagerly stared at Mikoto, waiting for her analysis.

“He’s telling the truth, or at least he’s convinced he is...” she stated, “Alright, second question, are you working for Ulrich or for Margaret Bishop?”

“Margaret Bishop..?” Wulfweard repeated, blankly staring at her, “You mean the government of Treno is behind all this?”

“Answer my question, please.” Mikoto interrupted him.

“Alright, no, never would I serve the interests of a traitor to our people, nor those of a rich bitch like Bishop for that matter.”

“Good...” the monkey-tailed scientist commented. “Third question, are you under someone else’s orders or are you exclusively following Puck’s instructions?”

“I’m fighting to fulfill Puck’s last wish: to free Burmecia from Ulrich’s tyranny and to prevent a war between our kingdoms.” he answered without hesitation.

Zidane glanced at his sister and she nodded to him, confirming that he wasn’t lying.

“There’s something that still bugs me, Wulfweard...” the king intervened, “Was Puck ruthless enough to put Freya’s soul on the line for his cause?”

“Ruthless? I think you’re twisting the facts, sir.” the dragoon retorted, “You seem to be quite obsessed with the Reliquary, in fact... as if you were accusing Lord Puck of trying to murder his dearest friend with it.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Wulf, I find your ideals beautiful and we both agree that Ulrich is a threat to the entire Mist Continent, but how does exposing your *dearest friend* to a soul-eating god in order to accomplish your goals make you any better than him?” Zidane asked.

“Let me tell you two things, Zidane Tribal.” the dragoon replied with a dangerous glint in his eyes, “First of all, I’ve already told you that what happened last night was literally *unforeseeable*. Second, I find your behavior towards your loved ones *troubling*.”

“Troubling? What do you mean?” the genome inquired.

“You’re so hellbent on protecting them from all harm that you’re smothering them without even realizing.” Wulfweard asserted, “Freya is a grown adult, a professional soldier and she hails from a culture that you do not understand. She doesn’t need your approval to make her own choices, and, had the *Allfather* not called her to arms, she would have been in her right to decide whether to challenge him or not, your *royal opinion* notwithstanding.”

“*Royal opinion..?*” Zidane growled, breathing harder and harder, “You may be right about my controlling tendencies, but don’t you think it was a little too soon to give her that *thing?!?*”

“Why do you insist on treating her like a child, Tribal?!” the dragoon exclaimed.

“I treat her like a friend who needs a fucking break, *godsdammit!*” the king barked, “She’s just lost *everything*, Wulfweard! Letting her cool down a bit before giving her a life or death choice is not belittling her, it’s basic decency, man!”

“That’s enough! This argument has *nothing* to do with the matter at hand!” Mikoto interrupted them, trying to change the subject before a senseless fight broke out between the two. “Colonel, would you please state your plan to take down Ulrich?”

“I can’t do that, and I’ll tell you *why*: Alexandria does a terrible job of keeping delicate information *confidential*. Do you know how did I find out that *Cherry* was staying here, Your Majesty? I simply bought the secret from your subjects, along with the intel I needed to infiltrate the castle.” the old soldier stated, sternly folding his arms, “Believe me when I tell you that with that knowledge I could have beheaded Alexandria in a single night. Instead of that, I’m calmly sitting here, politely taking your *shit* while my country burns.”

“Heh... you’re quite the arrogant geezer, aren’t you?” Zidane retorted with a smug smirk.

“I’ve just snuck up on the legendary Thief King while being in my sixties.” Wulfweard replied with a satisfied smile, “I think my actions speak louder than my words.”

“Okay, enough cock-fighting for today.” the monarch exclaimed, mildly embarrassed, “Just tell me one thing, and you better be honest about it: how many people are you willing to kill for your cause? Ten? One hundred? One thousand?”

“You’re quite prudish for a man who personally slaughtered *hundreds* to settle a border dispute...” the burmecian shot back, “but luckily for both of us,

this time I only intend to take *a single life* to save yours, hers and millions more.”

“*Bullshit.*” Mikoto exclaimed, “I don’t even need this mask to realize that you’re lying to yourself.”

Zidane gaped at her, utterly baffled. The dragoon huffed irritably and rolled his eyes before glaring at her.

“Excuse me?” Wulfweard growled.

“Murdering an usurper is not going to change things in the long term. You would be just replacing a tyrant with another one.” she calmly explained, much to the warrior’s annoyance.

“How old are you, girl? Twenty? Twenty-five?” he disdainfully asked her, “What could you possibly know about how this world works? About how *war* works?”

“That’s a childish retort and you know it: you can’t hide your inner turmoil from the eyes of my mask.” the scientist stated, “Have you ever heard about *ontological inertia*?”

“Enlighten me, kiddo.” the dragoon replied, his lip threatening to curl into a snarl.

“In simple words, ontological inertia is the tendency things have to continue existing, even if you destroy what created them.” Mikoto explained, “I have no doubts a man like you could easily eliminate Ulrich, but that would certainly lead to a civil war, for his ideas won’t simply disappear just because you killed him. Let me ask you something, noble knight: can your species really afford any more in-fighting?”

Zidane glanced at Wulfweard’s conflicted expression and realized that if Alexandria was going to secure an alliance with the stubborn old wolf, it would be entirely thanks to Mikoto.

“What do you suggest, Professor?” the veteran dragoon inquired, his voice no longer tinged with contempt.

“We have an unknown enemy in Treno who’s illicitly funding and arming Ulrich for war. I’m sure that if we join forces to publicly expose the puppeteer, the puppet will fall on its own.” Mikoto affirmed.

The old soldier stared pensively at her for a moment and finally smiled, closing his eyes.

“Your idealism is refreshing, if a little bit naive... you remind me of someone I trained many years ago.” he said, reclining himself on his chair and taking a deep breath, ‘Alright, I’ll let you on far more than I’m allowed to, so listen carefully: as you might imagine, I’m not working alone. I cannot give you names, places or numbers, but I can tell you that we all share the same ideas. We call ourselves the “Partisans”, so if you ever hear that word from a stranger, you can rest assured you’ve just met a friend.”

“Your secret is safe with us, Wulfweard.” Zidane said, “I give you my word.”

“You shouldn’t make promises if you’re not sure you can keep them, sir.” the burmecian replied, cheekily smirking at him, “Speaking of that, I don’t know if I can stop our original plan from unfolding, but I’ll do my best to convince the team to go after our mysterious enemy in Treno. Maybe you’re right and we can take Ulrich down without spilling any more burmecian blood... well, what do you say?”

The king glanced at the scientist, seeking her approval. She nodded her head in return.

“I say we have a deal.” Zidane replied, extending his hand to the dragoon, “Welcome on board,

Wulfie.”

“You know I could be your father, don’t you, kiddo?” the dragoon retorted, accepting the handshake.

“Believe me, you should thank Reis you aren’t.” the genome quipped.

Sitting on the ledge of a cliff overlooking Alexandria, two worried burmecians argued about what to do next.

“I say we should storm the castle and bring him back! I knew he would get caught!” one of them exclaimed. She was a petite, brown haired demi-rodent wearing leather armor with multiple short knives strapped to it.

“But Wulfweard said that under no circumstances we were to risk the whole operation by going back to Alexandria, Sigrunn!” the other one answered. He was leaner and taller than her but less muscular and carried a lyre strapped to his back.

“C’mon, Sigfred! You know he’s the man with the plan! Losing him now will make breaking

Fratley out nigh impossible!” she exasperatedly replied.

“We still have Brynhild and Astrid and we know full well what to do.” he answered, “If we get caught or killed now, Brynhild alone won’t be able to save *Irontail* and we will lose everything!”

“Are you seriously going to abandon master Wulfweard here?” Sigrunn squawked, standing up to intimidate her squadmate, “I should have known that sooner or later you’d turn out to be a coward, you spoiled brat!”

“Hey! I’m just saying that he gave us clear instructions and that his survival odds with Queen Garnet are much, much better than Fratley’s chances with Ulrich!” Sigfred answered, “I’m not a coward, Sigrunn! *I’m a soldier* and I intend to follow my officer’s orders!”

Sigrunn kicked a nearby pebble downhill and sat down again, letting out an angry huff. They remained silent for a while until Sigfred, mostly out of habit, took out his lyre and started playing a long forgotten cleyran tune.

“What the hell is that?” Sigrunn inquired, “It sounds really weird... but it’s also kinda catchy!”

“I think it used to be a hymn to Reis or something along those lines...” Sigfred replied, playing another short section of the song before resuming his explanation, a custom of his that annoyed Sigrunn to no end, “I believe it’s called the ‘*Eternal Harvest*’... it always cheers me up when I’m feeling down.”

“So it was true, you really *are* a follower of Reis... a *heathen*.” his companion said.

“I like her more than Berlioz, that’s for sure. Why, do you find it weird?”

“What can I say? You’ve always been an all around weirdo... but you’re kinda fine the way you are. Kinda.”

“Uh... thank you?”

“You’re welcome.”

They ran out of things to say and Sigfred kept playing his lyre while Sigrunn absentmindedly sharpened one of her knives with a rock.

...

“Why aren’t you leaving, Sigfred?” the young warrior asked after a moment.

“I dunno... it’s nice and warm up here, I have my music, you have your stabby things... we’ve just had lunch...”

Sigrunn stared at her squadmate and smirked.

“Heh... I knew you’d do the right thing.” she exclaimed.

“It’s what I call a compromise solution, Siggie.” he replied with his eyes closed, “If he doesn’t come back by nightfall, I’m taking the ship back to Burmecia. Someone has to tell Astrid what happened.”

Sigrunn’s ears twitched. She shushed her comrade and silently approached the edge of their improvised platform, knife in reverse grip and ready for trouble.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” she exclaimed, waving her companion closer, “C’mere Sigfred! Bring the rope!”

“Is he back?!” the bard inquired, hurriedly reaching for their climbing cord and giving it a strong pull to check if it was correctly tied to the tree, “Here goes!”

“Gimme, gimme!” Sigrunn ordered, impatiently taking the line and throwing it down the cliff, “I can’t believe he made it! Infiltrating the royal palace on his own... what a crazy old fart!”

Like a zombie breaking out from its earthen prison, Sir Wulfweard extended his hand upwards. The younger burmecians immediately grabbed his arm and pulled him back to safety.

“*Dammit...* I’m too old for these stunts...” the knight grumbled, rubbing his sore lower back, “Good morning, kids, how have you been?”

“I was already bored to death before Sigfred started playing his stupid *banjo*.” Sigrunn replied, dusting herself off.

“It’s a lyre, Siggie.” the musician corrected her while he handed his instructor a water canteen, “How did the mission go, sir? Did you manage to contact Freya?”

“Better than that, boy.” the veteran dragoon replied before chugging down half the bottle, “Father Berlioz favors her. She will probably become the next Spear.”

“*For real?!*” his students yelled in unison.

“Yeah, but let’s not count our chocobos before they hatch.” Wulfweard answered, throwing the canteen back to Sigfred, “Get the ship started, Partisans, we have work to do.”

15. Before the Storm

“Today is the day...” Quina thought, jumping out of bed at the crack of dawn. The strange creature got dressed and left the castle, heading for the market district as usual. It was a beautiful spring morning, and the cobbled streets of Alexandria were already bustling with life and color despite how early it was.

“Hmph... I can’t believe Garnet and Steiner are going to take such a terrible risk. I hope my fears prove unfounded...” the toad-like creature thought while it expertly picked the freshest seasonal fruits and vegetables for the grand occasion, *“How tragic... I was expecting peace to last a little longer. Sometimes I wonder how much more must we suffer for people’s bloodlust to be quelled for good.”*

“Hey Quina, what do you say we throw the best party ever before Dagger leaves for Burmecia?” Zidane had suggested last night and the Qu had immediately accepted to lend its fabled culinary skills to the cause.

“Good morning, big white!” Quina’s favorite grocer exclaimed, “How’s everything going?”

“GOOD MORNING!” the Qu blurted out, “ME WANT BEST YUMMY-YUMMIES FOR BIG PARTY!”

“Ho ho! Someone’s happier than usual today, huh?” the shopkeeper replied in a somewhat condescending manner.

“*Well... that certainly didn’t come out as I expected...*” the chef thought, mentally cursing its strange speech impairment, “NO, ME WORRIED FOR FRIENDS, ME COOK TO MAKE FRIENDS HAPPY!”

“Oh! You’re preparing a special meal for your buddies! That’s so sweet! What do you have in mind?” the grocer asked.

“THE BESTEST FEAST EVER!” Quina replied, handing the shop attendant a ridiculously long list of ingredients, “WE GONNA NEED CART FOR THIS!”

“Again!” Beatrix ordered, raising Save The Queen, and charging it with a tremendous amount of spiritual power.

“I’m ready!” Steiner said, adopting a fighting stance, “Do your worst, Bea!”

“Here goes!” the general exclaimed, unleashing a devastating energy projectile with a swing of her sword. Her technique was so distressingly powerful that it left a deep crevasse on its wake.

“*Hnnrrrgghh!*” the Pluto knight grunted when the green orb of destruction collided against the flat of his Ragnarok with the fury of a hundred charging Zaghnols, threatening to bend the blade inwards like a banana.

“Remember what I’ve taught you!” the general yelled, “Don’t absorb it! Deflect it!”

“I swear I’m trying, my love!” Steiner screamed, putting his whole body into pushing the energy blast away from him.

“Come on, Adelbert, you can do it!” the swordswoman exclaimed, “Do it for Garnet! Do it for me!”

“*Raaaagghhh!*” the Pluto knight roared and with a final effort he managed to redirect his wife’s technique upwards, punching a giant hole in a passing cloud.

“Yes! Yes!” Beatrix yelled, running towards her exhausted husband. He hadn’t managed to catch his breath yet when the paladin tackled him to the ground and planted a kiss on his lips.

“Whoa, Bea, this is so... *scandalous!*” Steiner shrieked, gasping for air.

“Oh, shut up and kiss me, you big prude!” she shot back, resuming her affectionate onslaught. Two passing soldiers witnessed the scene and quickly walked away, lest they ended up like the now donut-shaped nimbus.

“... and the west wing corridor also has an exit... here, see?” Freya explained, marking the gate on the burmecian royal palace map that she had drawn, “It’s possible to escape the building through that door, but it’s safe to expect resistance, for it tends to be heavily guarded.”

“Alright, so we have three possible ways out... good.” Garnet commented, letting out a yawn.

“Do you want to take a break?” the dragoon politely asked.

“Yeah... I’d like to talk about something that doesn’t involve the possibility of getting murdered.” the queen replied, stretching out, “Tell me about you, girl... it’s been so long since the last time we’ve had a good heart-to-heart.”

“Me? *Uhh...*” the burmecian awkwardly muttered, “I don’t have much going on... besides, well, all the *dueling a god to the death* business...”

“Heheh... I like your sense of humor.” Garnet said with a crooked smile, resting her cheek on her hand, “I was talking about your dreams, Freya, your ambitions. What do you want to do after all this?”

“I... don’t know.” the knight replied, realizing that she didn’t remember the last time she had been asked that question, “I guess that if everything goes as planned, and it never does, I’ll work hard to become the leader my people needs.

“So, you’re really going to do it... you’ll challenge Berlioz and Ulrich...” Garnet said, clasping her hands together.

“I can’t go back now. I won’t let Ulrich hurt anyone else again.” Freya firmly asserted.

“Do you absolutely have to... you know..?”

“Kill him? No, it’s not necessary. Even if he deserves it, I refuse to perpetuate the cycle of violence.” the burmecian answered, “Exposing him as the criminal he is and then defeating him in honorable duel is more than enough for me.”

“Wow... queen Freya Crescent, warrior demigoddess of Burmecia, it doesn’t get much more badass than that, huh?” Garnet said, letting out a giggle, “pardon my lindblumese... spending too much time near former crooks can be noxious to one’s manners.”

They chuckled for a while, mostly because they badly needed to simply laugh about something.

“How is it like? To be a queen, I mean...” the burmecian inquired, realizing a second too late how childish that line sounded, “Sorry for the silly question... I find it hard to imagine such a different lifestyle.”

“Well, that depends on which kind of queen you want to become.” Garnet answered, taking a sip of her tea, “If you brainlessly let others use you as a pawn in their games, you’ll become a *figurehead*, and you’ll live comfortably until your masters decide that you have outlived your usefulness. If you blindly fight everyone you don’t like without a plan,

you'll become a *martyr*. Beautiful in paper, useless for your people. Now, if you play it smart while staying loyal to your beliefs, then you'll get to live a terribly stressful life, rife with enemies trying to kill you, and if you're really, really lucky, you'll manage to change something truly important for the better and be remembered for it."

The queen finished her cup in silence, painfully aware that her little speech had completely killed the mood. Freya found herself at a loss for words too, not because of her friend's grim outlook on politics (she expected something along those lines, given her recent experiences with Puck and Ulrich), but because of how the strong and independent Dagger and the kind and wise Garnet had merged into a woman who had survived no less than twenty years as a head of government without betraying herself or her loved ones.

"Garnet... I would like your advice on something that's been bugging me." Freya said, staring at her reflection in the teacup.

"Go ahead, I'm listening." the queen replied.

"Lately I've been feeling kind of... used..." the burmecian muttered, brushing a strand of hair away from her left eye, "Sir Wulfweard told me that,

during his last months, Puck kept me in the dark about many things... mainly because he wanted to protect me from Ulrich.”

“I see...” Garnet commented, “It’s horribly frustrating when your loved ones do that.”

“I know, right?” the dragon knight said, “I had no idea about the Partisans’ existence, for example... how could he hide something so important from me? I’m a warrior! A dragonslayer! My skin is nothing but scars and calluses, Garnet!”

“... but people keep sheltering you, even when you’d be happier on the frontlines.” her friend added with a knowing smile.

“It’s so humiliating! First Fratley, then Puck, Wulfweard and now even bloody Berlioz... I’ve done nothing but to let others dictate the course of my life!” the dragon knight exclaimed.

Garnet briefly pondered if asking the question she had in mind to the soon-to-be Spear of Berlioz was a good idea, but she decided that Freya deserved to have at least someone who cared about what she wanted.

“Umm... Freya... how do I put this... do you really want to become a queen?”

The dragon knight lowered her eyes and thought for a moment before answering.

“I’m not sure if I can tell between my own desires and my sense of duty anymore...” she replied, “Someone has to challenge Ulrich before he starts a massacre, and I’m in the best position to do it. I don’t know if I’m ready for what comes afterwards, but I know one thing: I love my people, and I want to see Burmecia bloom again. If becoming a leader is what it takes for that to happen, then I’ll do it... whether I like it or not.”

“I see... I can empathize with what you say.” Garnet said, “I’m sure that you’ll become the greatest ruler in burmecian history, but please, do your old friend a favor...”

“Whatever you need, Garnet.”

The summoner rose to her feet and approached the dragon knight. She then rested her hands on the burmecian’s shoulders and stared right into her eyes, almond and ebony meeting jade and silver.

“I want you to remember that there is no such thing as fate and that you are no one’s tool.” Garnet said, “Always be true to yourself, my dear...”

“I will... thank you, for everything.” the dragoon answered with a warm smile. The queen then leaned in and gently kissed the burmecian’s forehead, sealing their pact.

“Hey girls, are you still in there?” Zidane yelled from the hallway, taking the duo by surprise, “Everyone’s waiting for us!”

“I hope you still remember how to dance.” Garnet said with a devious smirk, much to Freya’s confusion.

Alexandrian banquets felt very different to burmecian feasts, even if they were mostly similar. Used to the wild, torchlit parties of her people, Freya found the hustle and bustle of the grand hall *soothing* and was thoroughly enjoying herself, much to Zidane’s amusement, who had almost forgotten how excitable and chatty she could become after a couple mugs of ale. The burmecian certainly was what people called a happy drunk.

“So, we’re face to face with the Zagnol and monkey boy here present gets, like, *rammed into a wall*. I start stabbing the damn thing to draw its attention and then Zidane *jumps out of the pile of*

rubble he was buried under like a freaking zombie chimp, yelling at the top of his lungs ‘*Let me get the final kill! I have a date on the line here!*’” the dragoon recalled, making a surprisingly accurate impression of the genome’s younger self. Needless to say, everyone burst into laughter, king and queen included, and Quina made things even funnier by appearing out of nowhere, bringing a hilariously oversized roasted Zagnol leg.

After dinner, the tables were hastily removed and the musicians started playing upbeat tunes. Like an excited child, Zidane dove straight into the crowd, leading Garnet and Tot by the hand. The household staff cheered when the royal family took the dance floor by storm, a habit that consistently drove the conservative nobles up the wall.

“Look at Garnet!” Freya exclaimed, cheerfully tugging at Steiner’s sleeve, “Where did she learn to move like that?”

“I... have no idea...” the Pluto knight mumbled.

“Oh, that’s an easy one, Lady Freya.” Beatrix commented, standing up and cracking her neck as if psyching up for a fight. She then offered her hand to her bewildered husband with a sultry smile, “Shall we show her, Adelbert?”

“Huh..? *Uhhh...*” Steiner mumbled, turning various shades of red at once. He desperately glanced at Freya, looking for help and gulped when she nodded repeatedly at him with a drunken grin, “Yes, of course, my love...”

The dragoon cackled exaggeratedly at the sight of the general dragging her fully-armored husband to the dance floor. “Hey Quina!” she exclaimed, craning a glazed look at the strange creature, “What do you say we go dancing too?”

“I’m flattered by your proposal, but I’m busy right now exploring the delicate symphony of tastes and aromas that I have composed to celebrate our friendship.” the Qu thought, “NO THANKS, ME HAPPY HERE!”

“Oh? Okay... your loss. *Hic!*” Freya replied, downing her drink in a single gulp and wiping away the resulting frothy mustache, “*Ahhh...* hey! Those burmecians over there seem to be having fun!”

“WHY NO GO JOIN THEM?” Quina suggested, “THEY HELP ME COOK, THEY GOOD PEOPLE!”

“You know what? *You’re damn right*, Quen. *Hic!*” the dragon knight said, decidedly planting her

empty mug on the table and leaving to mingle with the group of ratlike workers.

“Hey Dag, look at Freya!” Zidane exclaimed, pointing at her, “Ain’t she popular tonight?”

“Yes... has she always been so social?” the queen asked, realizing that the dragoon had actually managed to befriend the other burmecians.

“I’ve traveled with her long enough to know that there are two Freyas: the fun one and the sober one.” the genome answered, “Speaking of which, I have a stupid idea. Tot! Would you do your old man a favor?”

“Of course, dad!” the young prince replied.

“Here’s what I want you to do...” the king said and then he knelt to whisper his plan on his son’s ear. He gave the child some gil and a pat on the back and the boy left the dance floor running.

“Heh, I think I know what you’re up to.” Garnet said, stealing a kiss from her husband “You’re so cute, Zid.”

Tot hastily approached the hard-working bards and whispered a request on the lead singer’s ear. The

prince then gave the man the money his father had lent him and the artist smilingly bowed to him.

“The king has requested us to play Reel Around the Moon, lads! On my mark! One, two, one, two, three, four!” the musician exclaimed, much to the rest of the band’s confusion. They nevertheless obeyed and started playing the wildly famous burmecian melody.

“What the..?” one of the demi-rodents muttered, caught off-guard by the song’s initial chords.

“Is this what I think it is?” an old cleyran maid asked, excitedly flicking her drooping ears.

Freya turned around and saw Zidane and Garnet grinning at her. She nodded at them and asked her newfound friends to follow her. Once they were in the middle of the grand hall, they started rhythmically patting the floor with their dainty rat feet.

“Alright, brothers and sisters!” the dragon knight exclaimed when the music kicked in, “Let us show them how it’s done!”

With vigorous elegance, the demi-rodents performed their traditional footwork in surprisingly good synchronization. Most of the people in the

room had never witnessed burmecian step dancing and many started clapping their hands, trying to follow the febrile rhythm of the song.

“Zid! Look at the guests!” Garnet whispered in her husband’s ear, “They love it!”

“I’m glad it worked out.” he whispered back.

The music rose to a crescendo. With an audacious smirk, Freya moved forward and performed the extremely difficult solo part of the choreography with enough grace to earn a standing ovation from the crowd.

“*Holy..!* Did you see that?!” Garnet exclaimed, covering her mouth in astonishment.

“Of course I did!” Zidane said, “Good ol’ Rat-face still has the moves! Go Freya, go!”

The dragon knight winked at the royal couple and then spun around, facing the rest of her improvised troupe.

“Everybody is staring at us..!” a young burmecian cook squeaked, almost in panic.

“Then let’s give them something to remember!” Freya answered, “Ready for the finale? Three! Two! One! Now!”

The dancers performed the complicated final sequence successfully and the grand hall erupted in applause for almost an entire minute.

“Thank you, thank you!” the dragoon exclaimed, bowing to her *‘public’*.

“Oh, man, that was awesome!” Zidane told his wife, clapping his hands so hard they hurt, “I wish she was always like this!”

“Hmm, this hidden side of her is very interesting, indeed.” Garnet replied, proudly smiling at her old friend, “I wonder if we can help her consciously tap into it...”

“It would make her life easier, that’s for sure.” the genome commented, “Do you think it’s possible?”

“I think she has a lot of potential, but she’ll have to overcome her insecurities to fully realize it.” the summoner replied, “I believe we can, and certainly should, give her a little push in that direction.”

“Agreed.” Zidane said, hugging his wife from behind and gently resting his chin on her shoulder, “Promise me you’ll come back so we can permanently put Rat-face into drunk mode.”

Garnet laughed and moved closer to him, wishing she could somehow grasp that moment and take it with her wherever she went. *“I promise you we’ll do far more than that when I return from Burmecia.”* she whispered in her husband’s ear.

“Oh? Now that’s an interesting proposal...” Zidane murmured with a cheeky smile, *“But why wait until then? Don’t you always say that one shouldn’t leave for tomorrow what could be done today?”*

“You never change, don’t you?” the queen replied, letting out a chuckle, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Long after the party had died down and everyone had retired to their own rooms, Freya found herself sitting atop the castle’s highest tower, idly gazing at the alexandrian skyline.

“Can’t sleep?”

The dragoon turned her head and saw Mikoto standing behind her.

“Oh, hello Mikoto!” Freya said with a friendly smile, “We missed you at the grand hall tonight!”

“I don’t like crowds. I find them terrifying.” the genome replied, “Mind if I join you?”

“Please, do.” the burmecian replied, “I could use some company right now.”

“Thank you.” the scientist said and sat beside her. They stared at the sky in silence for a long while.

“I love it up here. It’s so peaceful...” Mikoto commented.

“It’s perfect.” Freya affirmed, “I’d give anything to freeze time at this very second for eternity.”

“Wouldn’t you get bored eventually?” the genome innocently inquired. Freya chuckled, amused by her literal thinking.

“Heh... boredom is a rare and valuable commodity, Mikoto.” the burmecian answered, “I don’t know if I’ll ever get to experience it again.”

“You can sense them too, right?” the blond girl asked, “the winds of destruction, approaching.”

“Yes... that’s why I’m restless.” Freya replied, lying on her back to better contemplate the

firmament, “This is it... the calm before the storm.”

That same night, far away from Alexandria, a heavily armored airship flew under the rain towards the capital city of Burmecia. Deep within its bowels, Sir Fratley quietly pondered the past while sitting against the wall of his cell. He was chained with magic nullifying shackles, covered in fresh cuts and bruises and his eyelids were so swollen that he was almost completely blind. He knew he would be tortured and executed soon, but he had found some measure of comfort in thinking that if Ulrich’s henchmen kept trying to get information from him, it meant that they hadn’t managed to find Freya yet.

The dragoon was lost in thought when his extremely sharp hearing picked up a faint thud in the dark, followed by a muffled scream and then silence. He held his breath, trying to determine what was happening. After a moment, he detected the sound of approaching footsteps.

“Who’s there?” he muttered, unable to see the hooded warrior that was now staring at him from outside his cell.

“Do you want to atone for your sins, Irontail?” a familiar voice asked him.

“Sigrunn..?” Fratley mumbled.

Author’s note:

Hi everyone! Sorry for the unusually slow update rate, I’ve been traveling during the last two weeks and I’ve not been able to actually sit down and write. Also, we are halfway through the story, so I really wanted to polish this final “festive” chapter before everything goes to hell, hah. Thank you so much for reading this and for supporting my work, I hope you’re having as much fun as I am!

16. Raining Fire

Warning: graphic violence ahead.

Despite Burmecia's newfound arid climate, violent tempests still swept the land from time to time and the season had been rife with them, rendering aerial navigation highly dangerous.

Having been captured by Ulrich's forces in a remote village, Sir Fratley was being transported by aircraft to the capital of the kingdom to be tried and executed for high treason. Unfortunately for his captors, a deadly thunderstorm had formed in the middle of their intended route and they had soon found themselves struggling to even stay aloft due to the roaring winds and the blinding downpour; in fact, they were so busy trying not to crash that they didn't notice the smaller ship that had been tailing them.

"We have a visual on the target, sir!" Sigfred shouted, "Should I cloak our vessel now?"

“Go ahead.” Sir Wulfweard replied, eyes fixed on the flying colossus, “Bryn, stay low, if they see us, we’re screwed.”

Hidden in the clouds, the Partisans were discretely following the dreadnought-class airship, intent on boarding it to recruit the legendary *Irontail* for their cause. Sigfred abandoned the copilot chair and let the colonel take his place. He then sat on the ground, took out his lyre and started playing a strange melody that sounded more like disorganized noise than music.

“Is that vanish spell ready, Sigfred?” Wulfweard asked, “Because we are a little too close for comfort to that thing.”

“Almost there, sir!” The bard exclaimed as he plucked the strings of his instrument. After a few more notes, an intense blue light started radiating from the sapphire embedded on it. ‘*It’s ready!*’ the musician exclaimed, “Cloaking in three, two, one, *vanish!*”

A surge of translucent magic shot out of Sigfred’s lyre and wreathed the airship in a light-distorting field, making it almost invisible from the outside.

“Good job, boy!” Wulfweard said, “Sigrunn, get ready to jump, we’ll try to get as close as possible to the target!”

“About *godsdamn* time!” Sigrunn exclaimed, approaching Sigfred, “How are you holding up, partner?”

“Sustaining a spell like this... *is hard*...” he mumbled, clenching his teeth due to the immense strain that hiding an entire airship was putting on him, “Here... grab my hand...”

“Admit it, you just want to hold hands with me.” she quipped, earning herself an exasperated glare from the bard, “Okay, okay, just kidding... jeez...”

“*Ha, ha*...” the musician said as he used his magic to make her invisible, “There you go... as long as you don’t stand right in front of them, they shouldn’t be able to see you.”

“Man... this is always so weird!” Sigrunn said, staring at her own translucent body: she seemed to be made of living, shifting water.

“I don’t know... how long I’ll be able to... keep you invisible, so don’t linger... okay?” the musician wheezed, breathing hard due to the effort.

“Understood. Hang on in there, Freddy, I’ll bust Fratley out before you know it.” she said, giving him a pat on the back and turning to leave the command bridge, “Brynhild! Are you ready?”

“I was born ready, kiddo.” the musclebound pilot answered with a smirk.

“Move it, Sigrunn! We’re directly above the enemy ship!” Wulfweard ordered.

“Yes, sir!” she replied, heading for the main deck. The youngest Partisan hopped onto the taffrail and took a look at the dreadnought below. The wind howled and the rain roared, making her heart race. She felt like a dragon, itching to swoop down on her unsuspecting prey. She donned her hood, more out of habit than necessity and took a deep breath.

“Father Berlioz, give me strength!”

The Allfather made his presence known via thunder and lightning. Sigrunn grinned, overjoyed: *her god was calling her to battle*. Without hesitation, she leaped into the abyss and dove like a hawk, targeting the enemy warship’s curved roof. Seconds before impact, she spun like a cat and cast a fall dampening spell, landing without a sound.

“Contact! Siggy has successfully boarded the ship, sir!” Sigfred confirmed, sensing his squadmate’s location through their mystical link.

“Bravo!” Wulfweard exclaimed, “Brynhild, pull back and fly under that dreadnought!”

“Aye, aye, captain!” the pilot replied, hiding their ship beneath the warship’s hull.

“Good job, Bryn.” Wulfweard said, “Sigfred, you can uncloak us now, we’re out of sight.”

The bard closed his eyes and focused on the impossibly delicate task of dispelling their ship’s light distortion field without accidentally revealing Sigrunn in the process. His temples were soaked with sweat and his head was killing him, but he managed to do it nevertheless.

Above them, Sigrunn had finally managed to find a solid anchor point on the ship’s fuselage and was preparing herself to rappel down to the main deck. She took a deep breath and initiated the descent, treading as softly as she could on the metallic surface to avoid alerting any nearby crew members to her presence. She craned a brief look at the dark ocean of clouds around her and admired its terrifying beauty until nearby thunder reminded her

that she could get struck by lightning at any moment. After a couple tense minutes, the Partisan made her way to the lifeboats deck, where she left one of them running to serve as her getaway vehicle and finally infiltrated the airship via one of the nearby hatches.

“Left... right... right... stairs...” she muttered, memorizing the layout of the flying colossus. Luckily for her, the dreadnought blueprints that Brynhild had stolen two days ago were very accurate and she had no trouble navigating the vessel’s labyrinthine corridors, expertly using any shadows and noises that the environment provided to conceal her presence.

“Hmph... he must be behind that door...” the partisan thought when she came across a thick metal gate at the end of a narrow hallway, sealed shut by a force field and guarded by two very bored soldiers. She drew a pair of throwing knives but quickly discarded the idea due to Wulfweard’s strict no-killing policy. She was about to store them back in her armor when a huge lightning bolt struck Sigfred’s airship, setting one of its wings on fire. Much to everyone’s dismay, this distraction was enough to break his frail mystical link with Sigrunn, accidentally uncloaking her in front of the guards.

“*Oh, fuck..!*” she blurted out when she saw the astonished expression on the wardens’ faces. Without giving them time to react, the Partisan threw her blades at the hapless soldier on her left, piercing his throat to prevent him from screaming. She then pounced like a panther on the other one, her Dragon’s Crest flaring to life mid-air, and smashed his snout in with a single, skull-shattering punch.

“*Damn it, Sigfred!*” Sigrunn thought as she scrambled to disable the magic barrier. After tampering with the control panel for what seemed to her like an eternity, she managed to unlock the gate and proceeded to drag the lifeless guards inside the cell block. Unfortunately, they were so badly injured that they left a highly noticeable blood trail behind them, one that she didn’t have time to clean up.

...

“... *Who’s there?*” Fratley weakly muttered in the dark, startling the Partisan as she closed the door behind her. Sigrunn turned around and realized, to her horror, that her long-lost comrade in arms was barely alive.

“*Oh gods... what have they done to him..?*” she thought, taking a look at the dragoon’s grievous

wounds, “*What an idiot... to think that we could have avoided all this if he had just listened to Wulfweard...*”

Fratley dragged himself pathetically across the floor of his cage to try and get a peek of what was going on outside. The sight of it made Sigrunn feel a mixture of sorrow, compassion and anger; she wanted to punch him for defecting to Ulrich’s side and to hug him at the same time.

“Do you want to atone for your sins, *Irontail?*” she asked him, approaching his cell.

Fratley immediately recognized her voice. “... *Sigrunn?*” he mumbled, his lower lip trembling so much that he had trouble talking.

“Who else, knucklehead?” she retorted, focusing her power into her fist, “Clear the way, I’m gonna get you out.”

The dragon knight obeyed and Sigrunn smashed the magic stone next to his cage, shutting down its force field. She then ripped the door off its hinges with a powerful kick and tried to release her old comrade from his shackles, but failed due to their magic nullifying properties.

“Dammit! I can’t break them!” the Partisan spat, “Do you know where the keys are, *Fratboy*?”

“I think one of the guards had them...” the grizzled knight recalled. Without losing a second, Sigrunn started emptying her victims’ pockets. “Aha!” she exclaimed when she found the missing key.

“Why are you here, Siggy? It’s way too dangerous...” Fratley muttered.

“Because you might be a moron, but you are *our* moron...” she replied, unlocking his shackles with a satisfying *click*, “... and we’re not leaving you at Ulrich’s mercy.”

“We..? Is Freya with you? Is she alright?” the dragoon blurted out, grabbing Sigrunn by her shoulders and softly shaking her.

“I can’t give you details right now, but she’s fine, don’t worry about it.” the Partisan answered, a little disappointed. It was no secret that she had always envied the heroine of Burmecia for getting to marry him.

“*Thank goodness...*” Fratley whispered, shedding tears of joy.

Sigrunn's ears suddenly perked up and she stared at the door with an alarmed expression, "*Shit! We've got company!*" she hissed, "Can you walk?"

"I'll give it a try..." Fratley said, doing his best to stand up, but his badly injured legs gave way beneath him and he collapsed on the floor.

"Pray to Berlioz for strength, dummy!" the Partisan exclaimed, crouching to help him up.

"Even with his power I'd only slow you down, Siggy..." the dragoon grunted, shrugging her off, "Leave me here and flee... *cough...* before they put the ship on lockdown!"

"*Huh..? What is this..?!*" an unknown voice boomed from outside the room.

"*It's blood! Ring the alarm!*" another voice replied, "*Guards! Help!*"

Sigrunn knew that if the soldier outside turned the cell block's force field on, they would be as good as dead. She stared at her old comrade, then at the door, then back at him and made her choice.

"I'm sorry, master Wulfweard..." she muttered. The mark on her shoulder seemed to catch fire as she prepared to cast her mightiest spell.

“Siggy... what are you doing..?” Fratley mumbled when his fur began standing on end due to the Partisan’s insanely powerful aura.

“I’m switching to Plan B...” she answered.

“Wait, wha..?” the dragoon managed to say before the Partisan pointed her fist at the door and unleashed the dragon souls trapped within her. Delighted to wreak havoc in a burmecian ship, the spirits dug a burning tunnel through the aircraft’s bowels, disintegrating everything and everyone in their way until they pierced the hull and dissipated into the storm.

“*Holy shit!*” Brynhild yelled when she saw the specters bursting out of the dreadnought’s armored hide.

“That’s Siggy’s magic! She’s in trouble!” Sigfred exclaimed.

A deafening detonation interrupted the bard: the youngest Partisan’s attack had accidentally punched through the battleship’s engine room and the resulting chain of explosions had begun ripping it apart from the inside.

“*Godsdammit!* Brynhild! fly us closer to that hole! We need to extract them ASAP!” Wulfweard

barked.

“Aye aye, sir!” the pilot replied, skillfully dodging the falling debris.

“Bryn, watch out!” Sigfred shouted, pointing at a rapidly growing fracture that threatened to tear the doomed battleship in half. Gigantic metal shards started raining from above and the Partisans avoided them by the skin of their teeth.

“This is where the spirits came from... but where’s Sigrunn?” Brynhild said, gazing at the fiery innards of the warship through its ruptured fuselage.

“*Come on... come on... come on...*” Wulfweard muttered, scanning the flames for signs of his students.

“*There, look!*” Sigfred yelled, “They’re alive!”

Running full-speed and carrying Fratley over her shoulder, Sigrunn emerged from hell itself, her Dragon’s Crest ablaze. “*Father Berlioz! Give me strength!*” she howled and with the Allfather’s power flowing through her veins, she covered the last few meters and jumped off the warship, landing on her team’s vessel seconds before a massive detonation finished off the fatally wounded colossus,

making its flaming remains rain from the skies like a meteor shower.

“Siggy, Fratley! Get in!” Sigfred yelled, holding the hatch open for his comrades. Without losing a second, Sigrunn leaped onto the main deck and carried the wounded dragoon into the airship, closing the door behind her.

“Come on, Bryn... let’s get out of here before something else happens.” Wulfweard ordered, burying his face in his hands.

“Yes, sir...” the pilot replied, steering the ship away from the crash site.

Due to Fratley’s delicate condition, Sigrunn and Sigfred had to immediately carry him to the ship’s infirmary. As the bard prepared to start treating his wounds, Wulfweard summoned Sigrunn to the captain’s quarters over the PA system. The Partisans exchanged worried looks, for they knew exactly what the colonel wanted to talk about.

“*Siggy*... I’m so sorry...” Sigfred stammered, “I... I’ll talk to Wulfweard later, I’m sure he’ll...”

“Don’t worry Freddy... it’s okay.” Sigrunn said, interrupting him, “Now go help Fratley, I’ll be alright.”

The bard stood there with his mouth open, unable to say anything. “*Uh... Siggys!*” he finally exclaimed when his squadmate turned to leave.

“Yeah?”

“Next time, the drinks are on me.”

“See? You just wanted to hold my hand earlier on...” she quipped, winking at him before heading to the command bridge.

“You two have grown closer...” Fratley commented, startling Sigfred, “This is a far cry from your days at the academy.”

“I guess suicide missions have that effect on people.” the musician replied, “Sorry for getting distracted, I’ll fix you up right away.”

“Oh, don’t worry, that was quite amusing to watch.” the dragon knight said, flashing him a cheeky smile.

“*Ha ha*, very funny, you should have seen yourself when... *oh... oh, shit... man!* What have those bastards *done* to you..?” Sigfred mumbled

when he cut open the dragoon's blood-caked shirt. His torso was covered in festering cuts and he was missing several patches of fur. The bard gasped: the skin on those areas was horrifically burnt and twisted.

"... Those are just scratches compared to what I truly deserve..." the grizzled knight muttered.

Sigfred stared at the morbid spectacle until he managed to shake himself out of his trance. "We all make mistakes, my friend... I mean, look at me, I've almost got you two killed, like, ten minutes ago..." he said, taking out his lyre. As he plucked its strings, the sapphire embedded on his instrument started glowing brighter and brighter. "What truly matters is that in the end you did the right thing... that's why we're here. Now hold still, I'm gonna disinfect those wounds."

When the bard finished playing the arcane song, the shining gemstone flooded the room with pure golden light. Fratley let out a sigh of relief when the pain he felt suddenly subsided and he marveled at the much healthier color that his exposed flesh now had.

"*Blue magic...* the wondrous art of the Qu..." Fratley muttered, fascinated by the healing spell's

power, “I’ll never understand how did you master it...”

“*Master* it? Oh, no, this is but a *parlor trick* next to what a Qu sorcerer is capable of.” Sigfred replied, “My only merit is having realized that my passion for music could be worked into a substitute of the obsession for food that fuels their spells.”

“You’re a talented mage, Sigfred...” the dragon knight said with a kind smile, “I’ve always known that one day you’d achieve great things.”

“Thanks, mate, but I think you’re exaggerating.” the musician replied, checking for signs of persisting infection, “Does it still hurt? How do you feel?”

“Like *shite*... but alive at least.” Fratley quipped, making his comrade chuckle, “Sigfred, I’m sorry for changing the subject, but there’s something I need to ask you about.”

“You’re talking about Freya, aren’t you?”

“Indeed. Has she managed to safely flee the kingdom?”

“Yes, and she’s under the personal protection of some *very* powerful friends.”

“Garnet and Zidane?”

“Yep.”

“So they now know about Ulrich. Great.” the dragoon muttered, staring at the ceiling, “Um... how do I put this... does she know that I got caught?”

“No... we didn’t tell her. We didn’t want to stress her out more than she already was.” the bard nervously replied.

“You did well. Thank you, my friend.” Fratley said with a smile.

“She’ll be overjoyed to know that you’re with us, though!”

“No!” the grizzled dragon knight cut him short, weakly grasping his arm. Sigfred blankly stared at him for a moment, surprised by his reaction, “Please, let her keep thinking that I went into hiding. Do it for me, Sigfred.”

“Uh... sorry pal, but it’s not up to me to make that call.” the bard replied, “I can only promise you not to tell her as long as I’m not *ordered* to...”

“Ordered? Who are you working for?” the dragoon asked, arching his eyebrows.

“Ah, you’re gonna love this: Wulfweard is putting the team back together and you’re formally

invited to join us.” the Partisan explained with a lopsided smile.

“*M-master Wulfweard is here?!*” Fratley stammered.

“Oh yeah, *Irontail*, and he’s royally pissed off at Ulrich and his court.” the musician replied, “I’d take him up on his offer right away if I were you.”

The graying knight found himself thinking that maybe dying at the usurper’s hands wouldn’t have been *all that bad* after all.

“Sit down, please.” Wulfweard said, pointing at a chair.

“Yes, sir.” Sigrunn replied, immediately obeying his order. She knew better that to contradict her old teacher when he was furious.

The hardened veteran grabbed a half empty liquor bottle from a shelf, poured himself a drink and sat in front of his student, trying to calm himself down before saying anything. Knowing Wulfweard, Sigrunn had come prepared to be chewed out for her trouble; what she wasn’t ready for was for the disarmingly dejected stare that he gave her. The

younger Partisan swallowed hard: she would have certainly preferred to be yelled at.

“This is all my fault...” the old dragoon sighed, “I *knew* you two weren’t ready, but I brought you along nevertheless... guess I’ve lost my touch as an officer.”

“it was an accident, sir.” Sigrunn replied, lowering her eyes in shame, “I didn’t mean to...”

“An *accident*...” Wulfweard brusquely interrupted her, “There are less than ten living dragonslayers capable of doing what you just did, and three of them are aboard this fucking ship... how much time do you think we have before Ulrich’s troops show up on our doorstep?”

“I’m sorry, sir...” the youngest Partisan muttered, her gaze fixed on the ground, “We were cornered and about to get captured... Fratley was too injured to move and I couldn’t think of any other way to save his life...”

The colonel sighed and downed his drink in a single gulp. “I’m glad that you’re alright.” he said, fidgeting with his now empty glass, “When I saw the *fireworks*, I... I thought for a second that I’d lose you two...”

“Sir..?” Sigrunn muttered, daring to meet his gaze. Instead of the unwavering protector of Burmecia, she saw a tired old man, too stubborn, too passionate to let himself die, but too burdened by grief to be truly alive.

“Listen close, Siggy: under any other circumstances, I’d have you tried by a military court for disobeying a direct order, committing large scale manslaughter and putting the whole operation *and* your squad in danger... but... given that Sigfred lost control of the cloaking spell mid-infiltration, that getting caught simply wasn’t an option, and that we’re *very* low on manpower, I’ll let you fill in a report about what happened aboard that vessel. Astrid and I will then decide if you’re fit to remain in active service or not. Am I clear?”

Sigrunn found herself at a loss for words. The Partisans were the closest thing to a family she had, and the idea of getting dishonorably discharged terrified her even more than death itself.

“*Am I clear, Siggy?*” Wulfweard asked, his slightly broken voice giving away how miserable he truly felt.

“Yes, sir.” she replied with all the dignity that she could muster.

“Good. Dismissed.” the colonel said without even looking at her. Sigrunn rose to her feet and saluted him, but Wulfweard didn’t stand up. He gave his student an inscrutable stare for a moment before acknowledging her gesture with a slight nod of his head.

“I understand...” the young partisan muttered, clenching her teeth and blinking back tears.

17. White Noise

March 29th, 1820, Market District, Alexandria.

10:15 A.M.

“Good morning, Ms. Olson!” a little Burmecian girl in a red dress said, looking at the elderly baker with her round, innocent eyes.

“Oh, hello there, Ari!” the old woman replied with a tender smile, “How’s everything going? I’ve heard that you’re doing great at school!”

“Yes! My teacher says that I’m very smart!” the girl exclaimed, filled with pride, “And guess what! Daddy is so happy that he’ll take me to the Royal Garden tomorrow!”

“Ah! That’s terrific, young lady!” the baker commented, handing Ari a delicately glazed cupcake, “Here, have a reward for all your hard work!”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, *thank you, Ms. Olson!*” the kid yelled, bouncing all around the

place, holding her sweet treasure in a small, fuzzy hand.

“Enjoy it! You’ve certainly earned it!” the old woman said, “Oh! What did you need, by the way? I almost forgot to ask you, *tee-hee...*”

“Um... daddy sent me to buy a loaf of bread and some biscuits... but I can’t remember how many biscuits he wanted...” the girl in red replied, giving her pouch of coins to the shopkeeper, “How many biscuits can I buy with this, Ms. Olson?”

“Let me see...” the baker said, adjusting her glasses. She counted the gil and put the bread and the biscuits into the girl’s basket, “Do you need anything else, my dear?”

“No, that’s all! Thank you very much!” Ari exclaimed, turning to leave.

“Have a nice day, sweetheart!” the old lady said before going back to work.

Skipping down the cobbled streets of Alexandria, Ari left the Market District and headed toward Little Burmecia, the neighborhood that hundreds of refugees called home. It had the distinction of being

the biggest public housing project in Gaia and it had been lovingly designed by an Alexandrian-Burmecian team of architects with the rainy kingdom's aesthetics in mind.

"Huh..?" Ari muttered, skidding to a halt. "Is that *Soren..?*"

Sitting near a fountain in one of the city's squares, a young demi-rodent child sobbed, hugging his knees. He was the only surviving son of a Cleyran family that had moved to Alexandria a few years ago, and most importantly, he was Ari's best friend.

"Are you hurt, Soren?" she asked, rushing to his side.

"*Ari..?*" the boy croaked, meeting his friend's pale blue eyes, "No, I'm not hurt... I'm just... *sad.*"

"Sad? What happened?" Ari worriedly asked, "Was Mr. Becker mean to you again?"

Soren felt a lump in his throat.

"We are... leaving the kingdom..." he stammered, much to Ari's shock.

"You're..? But why? When..?" she stammered, unable to think straight.

“Today. Dad said something about needing to get out of the city before sundown,” Soren explained, hitting the stone fountain with his fist and hurting his hand in the process. “I don’t understand... I wanna stay here! I’m tired of traveling!”

Ari was devastated and furious at the same time; Soren was too important for her, and if his family wouldn’t listen to him, then she would make them listen to her.

“Come with me! I have an idea!” she said, extending her hand to him.

March 29th, 1820, Little Burmecia, Alexandria.

10:40 A.M.

“Um... Ari, why are we doing this?” Soren asked, staring nervously at the wooden fence.

“We can’t go through the front door, silly. If dad finds out you’re here, he won’t let you stay,” his friend replied. “Now help me climb, please.”

“O-okay...” the boy said, giving her a leg up.

“The coast is clear!” she exclaimed, sitting atop the fence, “Here, grab my hand!”

Soren obeyed and climbed over the wall with her help.

“That’s my super secret hideout!” the girl whispered, pointing at a small storage shed in the middle of her backyard, “C’mon, dad could come back at any time!”.

They silently lowered themselves into the garden and made a run for the structure. Ari unlocked the door and held it open for her buddy, who quietly followed her inside.

“Um, Ari...” the boy said, having realized that the place was too small and simple to truly serve as a hiding spot, “I don’t think this is gonna work.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, pushing a crate away and uncovering a hidden trapdoor, “*Ta-daaa!*”

“Whoa! Is that a secret passage or something?” Soren exclaimed. “Where does it lead to?”

“Dad built it to store potatoes but he doesn’t use it anymore, so I’ve turned it into my secret base!” Ari explained, opening the hatch to reveal a stinky, stone-lined underground chamber, “C’mon, get in!”

“O-okay...” he stuttered, taken aback by the stench that came from below. “*Guess I can’t go back now...*” he thought as he climbed down the stairs into the dank cellar.

“Watch your step! I’ll be there in a second!”

“It sure is dark in here!” the boy exclaimed seconds before stepping on something soft and slimy, “*Eww! What is this?!*” he squawked, lifting his small rat foot and rubbing it against the wall.

“It’s just moss, silly!” Ari said, bringing a lit candle into the cellar, “Well, what do you think?”

The boy opened his mouth to complain, but decided to be nice instead. “It’s awesome, Ari! It even looks like a real dragon’s den!”

“I know, right? And you can stay as long as you want!” she said, overjoyed. “I know it’s a bit cramped and dirty, but when I grow up, I’m gonna be a dragonslayer just like dad, and I’ll have my own secret base with all my weapons and stuff and I’ll invite you to play in it every day. *It will be great!*”

“Oh, that’s cool Ari...” Soren commented. Being of Cleyran descent, the whole dragon hunting business was more than a little off-putting to him.

“That’s not all!” the girl exclaimed, opening a small wooden chest and taking a folded sheet of paper from it, “Here, take this candle, I’m gonna show you something!”

Her friend obeyed and held their meager light source while Ari unfolded her mysterious treasure; it was a crudely drawn picture depicting a Burmecian warrior in red armor wielding a strange, three-pronged spear.

“Do you know who this is?” she asked, pointing at the illustration.

“Um... a dragoon, maybe?”

“Oh, she’s not just *any* dragoon, buddy. *She’s THE* dragoon, Freya Crescent!” Ari explained, “When I become a knight like her, I’m gonna meet her and we’ll be besties and I’ll ask her to teach me her clan’s secret technique, the Cherry Blossom! She’s *sooo* cool!”

“Dad says that she’s a bad person...” Soren said, prompting Ari to stare blankly at him. “He says that she’s a traitor and a criminal. I’ve even heard that she murdered King Puck in his sleep a week ago!”

“No... you’re wrong!” the girl in red replied, clenching her fists so hard that she hurt her palms

with her pointy claws, “She would never do something like that! My dad says that she’s the greatest hero ever! If it wasn’t for her, we wouldn’t be alive in the first place!”

“I’m just repeating what my dad told me...” the boy explained in an apologetic tone. “Maybe the adults got it all mixed up and it’s up to us to find out the truth...”

“And how are we supposed to do that?” Ari inquired, realizing much to her chagrin that she had accidentally crushed her precious drawing. “Aw, shucks!”

“Well... mom told me that Freya is here, in Alexandria.”

“*WHAAAAT?!*” the girl yelled, grabbing Soren by the collar and shaking him back and forth, “*Where is she?!*”

“Agh, let go!” the boy squawked, wrestling himself free from her grasp, “*Ahem...* she’s in the Royal Castle right now... maybe she’s visiting Queen Garnet and King Zidane.”

“*For real?!*” the girl in red exclaimed, glancing at her ruined picture and then back at her friend,

“We need to talk to her before she leaves! That way we’ll know which one of our parents is lying!”

“Um... I don’t think they’ll let us into the castle with these clothes...” Soren commented, staring at his second-hand pants and gaiters.

“Nonsense! I just know they will let us see her!” Ari retorted, folding back her drawing and storing it inside her leather pouch, “C’mon! We need to be back here before dad returns!”

“This is a terrible idea...” Soren sighed as he followed his friend back to the surface.

March 29th, 1820, Alexandria Castle.

09:55 A.M.

“What *are* you..?” Mikoto muttered, studying a tiny black chip through a magnifying glass. She had found it hidden deep within the black waltz core and was particularly intrigued by it, given the fact that it seemed to have no function at all.

As a way to please her and to honor the memory of the late Professor Tot, Mikoto was allowed to spend most of her time in his old laboratory whenever she visited Alexandria. She had taken the liberty of furnishing it with instruments and machinery well beyond Gaia's technological level and as a result the room was heavily guarded and its contents zealously kept secret by Garnet and Zidane.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Not now! Working!" the genome shouted, grabbing a screwdriver and preparing to dismantle the mysterious device.

Knock, knock, knock.

"*Are you kidding me?!*" Mikoto hissed, getting up and stomping off to the door, "What do you need? I'm busy right now!"

"Uh... auntie Mikoto? It's me, Tot..."

The scientist blinked twice and opened the door immediately. "Oh, hello, Sigma... I-I mean, Tot!" she greeted him, slapping herself for her slip-up.

"Huh? Who's Sigma?" the small genome inquired, staring at his aunt with those round,

curious eyes of his that reminded her so much of her beloved black mages.

“Uh... Sigma is... ah... a dear friend of mine!” she lied, smiling nervously, “I got confused because you look so much like him!”

“Oh! I’d like to meet him one day!” the young prince piped up, much to Mikoto’s dismay.

“Uhh... sure! I guess...” the scientist stammered, mentally kicking herself, “Wait, what brings you here, little Tot? Because you’re Tot and *totally not Sigma*, hehe... *ughh...*”

“Oh, right, mom’s leaving for Burmecia, so I came here to tell you that in case you wanted to say goodbye.” the boy replied, “I’ll be going now, wanna come with me?”

Mikoto stared at the soul core on her table for a moment and sighed, disarmed by her nephew’s cuteness. “Alright... lead the way.” she said, closing the door behind her.

With a thunderous sound, the royal hangar’s doors opened up and out came Garnet’s personal airship, the *Wind Rose*. Assembled in Lindblum

under the near-obsessive supervision of regent Cid himself, it had been conceived as a symbol of Alexandria's new political era.

"Your Majesty, we have carried out the final inspection successfully. The Wind Rose is ready for takeoff," a rather plump man in blue overalls exclaimed, approaching the royal couple.

"Good job as always, Horst. Thank you," Garnet replied courteously.

"Have a pleasant flight, ma'am." the technician said with what the queen interpreted as an unsettling, almost dangerous glint in his eyes.

"*Huh..?*" the summoner muttered, arching an eyebrow. She held the chief mechanic's gaze for a moment, looking for that strange spark, but it was gone.

"Is everything alright, ma'am?" the man asked with a disconcerted expression.

"Yes, thanks... please, carry on." Garnet answered, deciding that it wasn't the time to let her paranoia get the best of her.

"You okay, Dag?" Zidane inquired, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah, I was just... thinking.” the queen said with her eyes still fixed on Horst’s back.

“One Gil for your thoughts.” the genome joked, giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Um... nothing important, actually...” the queen muttered, “I’m just a little nervous and seeing the Wind Rose isn’t helping me at all.”

“Dag...” Zidane said, but he immediately decided not to finish his sentence. The summoner’s feelings towards her late step-mother were... complicated, so it was better to simply remain silent and listen to her.

“... When uncle Cid offered me to retrofit the Red Rose with one of his new engines, my answer was *no*,” Garnet said, staring at the enormous royal airship, “I wanted to get rid of the past in every way I could... I devoted both my life and my resources to make amends for all the misery this kingdom caused... and look at how’s that worked out for us. It’s a little frustrating, isn’t it?”

“Indeed, Your Majesty.” Steiner said, approaching the couple with Beatrix by his side. “... But this isn’t over yet. We can still make things right, and I’m sure we will.”

Beatrix stepped forward and kneeled before the summoner, humbly lowering her snowy head. “Your Majesty, you have my word that I’ll give my life in a heartbeat if that’s what it takes to help you on your quest for peace,” she affirmed.

“Thank you, guys... no queen could ask for more faithful knights than you two...” Garnet replied, both flattered and a little disturbed by the general’s declaration.

“Mom!” Tot yelled from afar, running towards the group. Mikoto was following him with a bashful expression: *she hated both farewells and crowds with a passion*. The young prince quickly covered the remaining distance to his mother and clung to her, refusing to let go.

“Hi there, sweetie...” the queen said, wrapping her arms around her son.

“Hello, mom...” the kid purred, “I brought Aunt Miko with me, she wanted to say goodbye too.”

“G-good afternoon...” the scientist said, visibly distraught by the amount of people around.

“Hi, Mikoto! Did you sleep well?” Garnet asked, warmly smiling at her sister-in-law of sorts.

“Um... actually I’ve spent the whole night working on the *heart*.” she stammered, sheepishly scratching the back of her head, “I kind of... lost track of time.”

“Really? Oh, you must be so tired!” the monarch commented, amazed by the genome’s addiction to work despite being already familiar with it.

“Naw, I’m fine. I was literally made for this,” Mikoto said, waving off her concerns.

“Anyway, thank you for everything you’ve done for us.” Garnet replied, offering her a grateful smile, “If it wasn’t for you, we would still be walking in circles by now.”

As the queen finished her sentence, something fast and furry landed next to Zidane.

“Show-off...” he said, realizing that their surprise visitor was none other than Freya, who had just jumped from atop the hangar.

“You’re one to talk,” the dragoon countered.

“Point taken,” Zidane conceded, “Where were you? You just vanished all of a sudden!”

“I went back to my room for this...”, the Burmecian explained, drawing a small envelope

from one of her pockets, “I wanted you to have it, Garnet.”

“Oh, thank you, Freya! That’s so...” the queen said, opening the package. Her eyes widened as she realized what it contained and she looked back at her friend in shock. “No... no, I can’t have this... this is way too important to you!”

“Yes, but you are even more important to me.” the dragon knight replied with a subtle smile.

Garnet held Freya’s old mythrill pendant in her hand and stared at it for a moment. It was made in the shape of a stylized cherry blossom and it had a small rune carved on its backside.

“This symbol... it meant ‘love’ in ancient Burmecian, didn’t it?” the summoner inquired, remembering the time she got curious about the dragoon’s amulet and asked her about it over dinner.

“You have a good memory! It means ‘*true love*’ or ‘*unconditional love*’, the kind that we share with those we consider family,” Freya explained, “It’s a truly powerful rune... may it shield you from all harm, my friend.”

“I... I don’t know how to properly thank you... all of you...”

“Uh... Your Majesty... I hate to interrupt but...” Steiner said, pointing at the Wind Rose. The pilot had already deployed the airstair and was waiting for them to board.

“Well... guess it’s time to go...” Garnet said, letting out a sigh.

“When will you come back, mom?” Tot asked, still clinging to his mother’s robe.

“I’ll be back in two days, honey,” she said, stroking her son’s raven hair, “Take care of your dad, okay? He may seem lazy but you just never know what kind of crazy stunt he might pull all of a sudden.”

“*Touché*,” the monkey king commented, shrugging nonchalantly.

Garnet softly pecked Tot on the forehead before standing up and pulling Zidane into one last, heartfelt embrace.

“I’ll help you babysit your father, little one. I’m already used to it,” Freya joked, resting her hand on the young prince’s shoulder.

“Oh yeah, tough gal? Lindblum ’97, remember that one? You still owe me a bag of candy!” Zidane

retorted with a crooked smile, “And let’s not forget about Oeilvert! If it wasn’t for *yours truly*, you’d be lacking a...”

“Okay, that’s enough!” Freya exclaimed, cutting him short, “We’ll compare scores later!”

“You two will never change...” the queen said, letting out a chuckle. She then kissed her husband and they spoke in whispers for a moment before she started heading toward the airship. As Steiner prepared to follow her, something soft stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Adelbert, please be careful out there,” Beatrix said, holding her husband’s hand, “And remember, when defending against magic...”

“... Always deflect, never absorb,” Steiner replied, completing her sentence, “Thanks, Bea. I-I umm... t-take care of yourself!”

“I love you too, silly,” the general said, leaning in for a last kiss.

“Ready, Adelbert?” Garnet asked once the Pluto knight caught up with her at the bottom of the airstair.

“Always, my queen,” he answered, throwing his bag over his shoulder.

March 29th, 1820, Alexandria Castle.

11:00 A.M.

“Hmph... where did I put that thing..?” Mikoto mumbled, searching her pockets for the key to Professor Tot’s laboratory. She was carrying a dish with two sandwiches in her other hand (Quina had insisted that it wasn’t good for her to work on an empty stomach), making finding the little bronze item a truly daunting task. “... Aha!”

She unlocked the door, trying not to forget all the different theories that she had concocted on her way to the lab about the mysterious black chip’s function.

“Hi there, did you miss me?” the genome said, turning on her work lamp and putting the strange artifact under its light, “Let’s see what makes you tick...”

The terran scientist carefully dismantled the device, constantly checking for booby traps as she progressed. *“Hmmm... looks like some kind of radio receiver...”* she thought, recognizing a cleverly designed inbuilt antenna, *“Could this mean that these things are meant to be controlled remotely..? But how? These cores should be too unstable to follow orders!”*

Disturbed by the idea of someone developing such a sophisticated targeting system in a world where people still traveled on chocobos, Mikoto decided to take a little break to clear her mind. She tried one of Quina’s sandwiches and was pleasantly surprised by how good it was.

Knock, knock, knock.

“I’m busy right now!” she yelled, chomping on the second sandwich.

“Miko, it’s me, Zid! Could you help me with something?” her brother shouted from the hallway. *“It’s important!”*

She let out a long, annoyed sigh and headed for the door.

“I swear I didn’t touch anything! It just started happening all of a sudden!” Zidane said, turning on the radio station that Cid had set up as a direct line of communication with Lindblum Castle. A strange, distorted noise started coming from the speaker, prompting Mikoto to arch an eyebrow in surprise.

“*What the..?*” the scientist muttered, checking the machine’s inner workings for damaged parts, but everything seemed to be fine.

“Is it broken?” the king asked, craning his head over her shoulder.

“No, and that’s weirding me out...” Mikoto answered, pensively scratching her chin, “Has this happened before?”

“Hmmm... just a handful of times, but it never lasted for more than a few seconds, so we thought that it was probably nothing.”

“A handful of times? So this isn’t some random phenomenon...” Mikoto muttered to herself, thinking about possible sources of radio interference. “Tell me something, brother, have you heard anything other than white noise during these episodes? Voices? Electrical pulses, perhaps?”

“Not that I know... oh, wait... does creepy-ass music count as something else?”

“Music? You’ve heard *music* on this channel and you haven’t told me?!” the scientist yelled.

“Whoa, whoa, calm down, Miko! I’m stupid, but I’m not *that* stupid!” Zidane said, “Two months ago, I was talking to Cid about an incident with some smugglers at North Gate when I heard something weird... it was some kind of song, playing faintly on the background. I assumed that the old man was listening to music on that new machine of his, you know, the one with the discs? But now that I think about it, why the hell would he be doing that in the comms room? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s for sure...” his sister said, glancing at the radio station. All of a sudden she froze up: *she had an idea*.

“What’s on your mind, Miko?” her brother inquired.

“Keep that thing on and tell me if the signal changes! I’ll be back in a second!” the scientist replied, scrambling for the door.

Having fought reality-ending abominations in the past, Zidane wasn’t one to be easily scared, but, for

some reason, he found the experience of listening to that strange transmission alone deeply unsettling.

“... *I have a very bad feeling about this,*” he muttered to himself.

Author’s note:

Sorry people for the extra long wait, but this chapter was particularly difficult to write due to its length and its importance lore-wise. Too many hard decisions had to be made, but I’m satisfied with the results and I hope you’ll like what comes next. See you soon!

18. The Reckoning (Part One)

*March 29th, 1820, Ulrich's Study, Burmecian
Royal Palace.*

01:00 A.M.

“... I’ve been thinking... must we stoop so low, Maggie? We could easily crush them with the strength of our armies alone, *we don’t need this!*” Ulrich the dragonslayer said, staring somberly at the elegant human woman sitting in front of him.

“Don’t you dare tell me that you’re getting cold feet right now, Ulrich!” she shot back, pointing a warning finger at him, “We’ve spent our entire lives preparing for this moment! We’re literally *hours* away from finally *winning!*”

“*Cold feet?* What we’re doing here is downright *disgraceful!* There’s no way the Allfather would approve of such trickery!” the regent of Burmecia barked, getting up from his seat with his fists clenched.

“Oh, so you’re honorable all of a sudden! That’s rich coming from *you*, who have poisoned your own king instead of challenging him to a fight for the throne like you *barbarians* do.” the woman retorted with a disdainful grimace

“*It just doesn’t work that way, Margaret!*” Ulrich roared, utterly offended, “To invoke the right of *trial by combat*, one must gain Father Berlioz’s favor first! Until the Obsidian Star is retrieved, I’ll never be a true king!”

“That’s entirely your fault. You should have put Puck under tighter surveillance.” Margaret Bishop stated, completely unimpressed by her adoptive brother’s tantrum, “I told you that he probably had allies in the shadows.”

“He was so close to Freya that I thought... I thought that *she* was his right-hand woman...” the usurper spat, trying to calm himself down, “... I realize now that she was only a mere decoy. Sly bastard...”

“Forget about Crescent, brother. By tomorrow morning, her charred remains will serve as a warning to those who dare oppose us.” the president of Treno affirmed, “However, after we’re done with Alexandria and Lindblum, we’ll have to deal with

these... *domestic traitors* immediately, lest they threaten the stability of your regime with that stupid box.”

“They are already at it, mind you.” Ulrich said, finding his own choice of words humorous for some reason, “Last night, one of our dreadnoughts came under attack by a particularly powerful dragonslayer. The ship was destroyed from the inside out and its... *cargo* was stolen, but we now have a pretty good idea of who we’re dealing with.”

“*You lost a dreadnought to a single rat? Does your incompetence know no bounds?!*” Bishop hissed, irritated by the loss of one of her beloved warships.

“Calm down, *Maggie*, this incident is far more useful for us than it is for them.” the usurper stated with a satisfied smile. He had always enjoyed getting a rise out of his perpetually scornful step-sister, “I know every man and woman who could have done that, and guess what? At least three of them have ties to two annoyingly outspoken detractors to our cause.”

“Hmph... it’s a good opportunity to make an example of them.” Margaret commented, regaining her composure, “Even if it wasn’t them who

attacked your ship, punishing high-profile dissidents in the most spectacular way possible will act as a powerful deterrent against would-be traitors.”

“A team of our finest *Jägers* is already working on the case. Defeating them won’t be easy, mind you, for they are some of the deadliest warriors alive, but I have confidence in our soldiers’ skills and experience. It’s only a matter of time before we take them down.” the dragonslayer said.

“Excellent. The stage is set, then. Soon we’ll see the rotten aristocracies of this continent crumble and fall. We shall build a fairer world order on the ashes of all these decadent rulers, brother.”

“Hmph... I sure hope that these disgraceful acts truly serve a greater purpose, sister.” the burmecian regent commented, staring at the agonizing embers on his fireplace, “This is not what I imagined when you told me that we would liberate Gaia.”

“Ulrich, think of your family for a second, *your biological family* I mean. Think of *all* the families that these greedy nobles have murdered in their unending quest for power. Don’t they deserve justice, Ulrich? Wouldn’t the world be a safer place for everyone if we destroyed these genocidal dynasties once and for all?” Bishop inquired.

“... You’re right. Justice has to be administered, even if we must get our hands dirty in the process. No one has ever been in a better position to challenge their hegemony than us...” the dragonslayer said, baring his teeth like an animal, “If we don’t seize this chance, we will become accomplices of their atrocities!”

“Exactly. You have the heart of a hero, dear brother. Father would be proud of you.” Bishop declared with a devious smirk.

“I’m not so sure about it... but at least we’re trying to do the right thing. Thanks, Maggie, I can see things more clearly now.” Ulrich replied, offering her a genuinely grateful smile.

March 29th, 1820, Town Square, Alexandria.

11:00 A.M.

“Um... hello, Ms. *umm...* soldier..?” Ari stammered, trembling before the imposing castle gate guard.

“Hmph. *What do you want?*” the sentinel grunted. She definitely wasn’t in the mood to deal with a pair of kids with too much free time on their hands.

“*Uh... yeah, I’m A-Ari and this is Soren... we wanted to...*” the burmecian girl said, trying and failing to stop stuttering.

“Speak clearly, kid, I don’t have all day.” the soldier rudely interrupted her.

“We want to see Freya Crescent! We know she’s in there!” Soren blurted out, irritated by the way the guard was mistreating his friend. He immediately covered his mouth with both hands when the soldier glared at him with a mixture of outrage and shock.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, brat. Go home now or I’ll arrest you two for vagrancy!” the sentinel barked, sending the burmecian duo running for their lives. They were so scared by her threat that they failed to remember what their parents had always told them about going into dark alleyways.

“Well, that was a total fiasco...” Ari said, huffing and puffing with her back pressed against the wall.

“Can we go back to the hideout now? I’ve never been so scared in my entire life...” Soren squawked,

trying to catch his breath.

“But you *saw it*, didn’t you?” the girl in red replied with a shrewd glint in her eyes, “She flinched when you yelled at her! She was lying!”

“So what? I’m absolutely *not* going to jail just because you want to meet your hero, Ari.” the boy asserted, glaring at his friend, “If dad finds out that I escaped with you AND got arrested as a result, I’m getting grounded for the next ten thousand years!”

“But Soren, this is not just about me or you! This is bigger than us! We could be the ones who solve the greatest mystery in both burmecian and cleyran history!” Ari exclaimed enthusiastically.

“*Nuh-uh!* Not in a million years! Nice try, but I’m not falling for that!” Soren shot back, crossing his arms, “If you want to get convicted that much, go ahead, but I’m *not* going to jail!”

“Fine! I’ll do it by myself then!” the girl in red huffed, angrily extending him a key.

“What’s this for?” the boy asked, confusedly grabbing the small bronze item.

“It’s for opening the storage shed, dummy.” she grunted, “Do as you want. I’m staying here until I

figure out a way to crack... this... *case...*”

“Ari..?” Soren mumbled when his friend stopped talking to him. She was paralyzed, staring at something behind him with a trembling jaw. The boy slowly turned around and recoiled in fear when he realized that an elegantly dressed albino burmecian was standing too close to him for comfort. His face was mostly obscured by his wide-brimmed hat and his only eye, redder than blood, seemed to glow in the dark.

“*White fur... missing eye... could he possibly be..?*” Ari thought, a trickle of sweat running down her spine.

“A-ah, hello, s-sir... c-can I help... you..?” Soren stammered, noticing the savage scar over the stranger’s closed right eyelid.

“Heh... glad you asked, kiddo.” the man replied, pulling a length of mythrill wire from inside his coat sleeve.

*March 29th, 1820, Airship Dock, Alexandria
Castle.*

11:15 A.M.

“Huh..?” Mikoto muttered when her airship’s radio started emitting the same buzzing noise that she had heard earlier on. She tried tuning the receiver to different frequencies, but all she got from it was an unending stream of white noise. “*This is inconceivable...*” she squawked as she pushed buttons and turned dials to no effect, “*What on Gaia could possibly interfere with a terran communications system like this?*”.

The genome sank into the pilot’s seat and thought for a moment, utterly frustrated by her inability to solve what should have been a trivial technical problem. After a few seconds of irritated contemplation, she turned on her ship’s main computer.

“GOOD MORNING, MIKOTO. WHAT CAN THIS UNIT DO FOR YOU TODAY?” a robotic voice inquired. It seemed to come from everywhere at once.

“Hi, Kal. I need you to analyze something for me...” the scientist replied as she unplugged the radio receiver from the PA system and connected it to her computer’s audio input jack. She then opened a sound processing program and started recording

the white noise signal with it, “Here, take this sequence and scan it for any kind of hidden information that you can find: speech, music, data, Mu mating calls, don’t discard anything without asking me first, okay?”

“UNDERSTOOD. SCAN MODE ENGAGED. PROCESSING. ESTIMATED TIME: TWENTY MINUTES” the artificial intelligence replied in its bored monotone.

“*Twenty minutes?* That’s an awful lot of time...” Mikoto said, biting her lower lip, “Alright, Kal, I’m leaving you alone but I’m taking the beeper with me. Ping me whenever you have results, please.”

“UNDERSTOOD. PROCESSING. ESTIMATED TIME: TWENTY MINUTES.” the AI answered.

*March 29th, 1820, Royal Comms Room,
Alexandria Castle.*

11:45 A.M.

“Wind Rose, this is Home Base, do you copy?” Zidane said, trying to contact Garnet’s airship to no avail, ‘*Wind Rose, this is Home Base, do you copy?*’ he yelled in frustration, but he only got a loud stream of white noise as a response, “*Dammit! What the hell is going on?!*” he shouted, suppressing an urge to kick the radio station.

“Hi, brother.” Mikoto said, entering the room without knocking, “Any news?”

“Nope. This piece of shit has been blaring out that fucking buzz non-stop and it’s getting on my nerves.” the king answered, “Any luck on your side?”

“Not really. My ship’s radio is doing the same thing, so we can conclude that our problem is external to the castle.” Mikoto explained, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed, “Kal is analyzing the signal right now to see if we’re dealing with some sort of high-powered broadcast or if it’s just random electromagnetic interference.”

“And what do you think it is?” her brother nervously asked her, “Do you think that someone’s causing it deliberately?”

“If this was Terra on a sunny day like today, I’d be inclined to say yes.” the scientist replied, “But this is Gaia, brother... communication technology on this planet is way too primitive to perform such an effective radio jamming... however, after seeing the mass produced soul core’s inner workings, I don’t know what to think anymore. We might be dealing with an intellect far ahead of its time.”

“Should I send someone to warn Garnet and Rusty about this? What if they are in danger? *What if..?*” Zidane blurted out, getting more nervous by the second.

“I think that we’re assuming the worst without enough evidence to support our theories, brother.” Mikoto interrupted him, trying to calm him down, “We should wait at least until Kal finishes analyzing the signal before making a decision. Causing a diplomatic incident over a gut feeling seems way too impulsive and risky to me.”

“I dunno, Miko... if Garnet is blindly heading towards an ambush, a couple of minutes could be the difference between life and death...” he said, anxiously rubbing his temples.

“Well, you’re the king, brother, not me... the choice is yours.” the terran scientist replied.

BEEP, BEEP, BEEP!

“Huh..?” Mikoto muttered as she drew the beeper from her pocket, “Brother, look! Kal has completed the analysis! I must to go back to my ship right now, wanna come with me?”

“Yes, please. I need to find out what the hell is going on *pronto*.” Zidane answered, following his sister out of the comms room.

*March 29th, 1820, Airship Dock, Alexandria
Castle.*

12:00 P.M.

“WELCOME BACK, MIKOTO.” the resident AI said as the genome siblings boarded Mikoto’s ship.

“Hello, Kal! Tell me what you’ve got, please.” The terran scientist replied, taking the pilot’s seat.

“WITH PLEASURE.” the digital golem replied, displaying line after line of unintelligible code on the main computer’s screen. “THIS UNIT HAS

FOUND AN ENCRYPTED DATA SEQUENCE
HIDDEN WITHIN THE SIGNAL.”

“*Oh, dear...*” Mikoto muttered to herself, staring at the monitor in utter disbelief.

“Wait, what does this mean, Miko?” Zidane exclaimed, scared out of his mind, “*Are we under attack or not?!*”

“Do you think you can break the encryption today, Kal?” the scientist inquired, ignoring her brother.

“UNLIKELY.” the AI dryly replied, “SHOULD THIS UNIT PERFORM A CRYPTOGRAPHIC ATTACK?”

“Yes, please...” the scientist sighed.

“UNDERSTOOD. PERFORMING
CRYPTANALYSIS. ESTIMATED TIME:
UNKNOWN.” Kal said in its infuriatingly
indifferent tone.

“Brother...” Mikoto said in a little voice, looking at Zidane with a mixture of fear and sorrow. He stared back at her for a moment, his expression changing from anxiety to bitter resignation.

“... We are under attack, aren’t we?” he asked.

“I can’t find another explanation for this...” she confirmed.

The genome king buried his face in his hands for a moment, trying to clear his mind.

“... Can you find out who’s doing this and where is this signal coming from?” Zidane asked after a short moment of silence.

“Hmm... this kind of radio jamming requires a big, highly visible antenna and a powerful energy source to work. Given the type of antenna that this castle has, such a structure should be logically located between us and the Southern Radio Tower in order to block all communications like this...” Mikoto said, crossing her arms, “Well... that is if our enemy isn’t actually using the tower itself to broadcast the signal...”

“I get it now... these bastards must be using the tower to cut the city off from the rest of Gaia!” the king said, “What we’re hearing is none other than their own coded transmissions! It’s almost like they’re taunting us... using our infrastructure against ourselves! Do you think that you can find out what they’re saying?”

“Well... Kal is already working on it, but we have no way to predict when will he manage to crack the code.” the scientist explained, “It could be in five minutes or in five days... it’s mostly a matter of luck.”

“Dammit... well... let’s give it a shot at least...” Zidane said, “Miko, I’m gonna get Beatrix and Freya; we need to secure that tower immediately or we’ll be left wide open for a full-scale attack.”

“What about Garnet?” Mikoto asked.

“I’ll send our fastest ship, the Quicksilver, after her. It will reach the Wind Rose in no time.” her brother replied, punching a red button next to the door to deploy the airstair, “Miko, I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done for us. I’ll think of a way to repay you once we get this mess under control.”

“Brother...” the scientist muttered as she watched the king leave. She turned around and stared at her computer’s screen. An unending stream of terran characters flooded it as the AI tried its hardest to decipher the mysterious transmission, “*To think that we could have been enemies...*” she thought, shuddering a little.

March 29th, 1820, War Room, Alexandria Castle.

12:40 P.M.

“Send me in.” Freya requested, all of a sudden, “If this has anything to do with Ulrich or Burmecia, I am your best bet and you know it, Zidane!”

“We have no idea what will we encounter out there, Crescent.” Beatrix intervened, “What if it’s a trap? If you die, there might be no peaceful resolution to our conflict with Burmecia. Thousands could die a senseless death!”

“I’ve been a dragoon for most of my life, Beatrix! I’ve even fought Ulrich himself and survived, for Reis’ sake!” Freya shot back, “No one in this room knows better than I do how burmecians fight! If there is a trap waiting for us in that tower, I could help you detect it before your troops spring it!”

“Your Majesty, letting Crescent leave the castle is way too dangerous! My soldiers alone can handle this situation!” the general confidently affirmed.

“Zidane, please, I know what I’m doing! Let me help you protect your people!” Freya exclaimed impatiently.

The king nervously looked at both warriors for a moment, unable to make a choice. They both had a valid point and wasting time arguing was a luxury that they couldn't afford.

“You’re so hellbent on protecting them from all harm that you’re smothering them without even realizing it.”

Sir Wulfweard's opinion on the matter hit him like a hammer, finally tilting the scale in Freya's favor. If they held back now and lost control of the entire communications network, hundreds of thousands of innocents would be left at the mercy of whoever was attacking the kingdom.

“As much as I hate to admit it, Bea, Freya is right...” he said, letting out a sigh, “We don't know who or what we're up against and doing things halfway right now could lead to tragedy.”

“B-but... yes, *sir*.” Beatrix reluctantly complied.

“Get a strike team ready and prepare to evacuate the surrounding area, Bea. We need to secure that tower ASAP.” Zidane ordered, “Freya, I had your armor repaired by our best blacksmith. You really thrashed that thing, but somehow he managed to fix it.”

“Thank you, my friend.” she replied with a grateful smile, “Leave this in our hands. We’ll stop whoever is doing this!”

“I know you will, but please be careful out there. Both of you.” the genome sternly said, “Any news about the Quicksilver, Beatrix?”

“It’s already on its way to intercept the Wind Rose.” the general stated, “It will surely catch up with Her Majesty before she leaves Alexandrian territory.”

“Awesome. Thanks Bea.” Zidane said, “Alright, girls, let’s do this! I’ll send out the Pluto knights to gather intel and to prepare the barrier in case we need it. If we discover *anything*, I’ll let you know immediately.”

“Yes, sir!” Beatrix said, performing the Alexandrian salute, “Come with me, Crescent, we’ll get you ready for combat.”

“Just like old times, huh?” the dragoon quipped, following her out of the room.

“... *I hope this isn’t a huge mistake...*” Zidane thought, nervously scratching the back of his head, “*Garnet... please, come back... I need you...*”

19. The Reckoning (Part Two)

Warning: Graphic violence ahead.

March 29th, 1820, War Room, Alexandria Castle

13:00 P.M.

“What? The Gunitas Outpost has gone silent too?!” Zidane blurted out, staring at a plan of Gargan Roo, the ancient underground passage that connected Alexandria, Treno and Lindblum.

“Not only that... the Border Outpost staff reports having heard loud screeching noises and... *screams* before the line went dead...” the Pluto Knight replied, “They request permission to cut the city off from the tunnel network right away...”

“... FUCK!” Zidane shouted, pounding the table with enough force to fracture it. He took a deep breath before addressing the terrified soldier again, “Kohel... please instruct the outpost crew to seal the

gate and to get the hell outta there. If anything gets past that door, they are to flood Gargan Roo immediately. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir!” the soldier replied, bolting out of the room. As soon as he left, another Pluto Knight cracked the door open and peeked inside.

“Your Majesty...” he nervously said, “T-the princess of Lindblum wishes to meet with you at once!”

“The princess of... wait... *Eiko is here?!*” Zidane squeaked, taken completely off-guard by her presence in Alexandria.

“Zidane! We need to talk right now!” a familiar, high-pitched voice yelled from the hallway. The soldier stepped aside, and a purple-haired young woman in Lindblum Air Force garb entered the war room with an unusually somber expression on her face.

“Holy shit, Eiko! What are you doing here?!” the genome yelled, “I thought you would be attending Puck’s funeral with your father!”

“I’m glad to see you too, jerk,” she retorted, giving him a back-breaking hug. “Where’s Garnet? Is she safe?”

“What do you mean by *safe..?*” the king inquired, his eyes wide open.

“Oh, crap...” Eiko muttered, staring at Zidane with a terrified expression, “She’s on her way to Burmecia, isn’t she?”

“Yes, why? *What’s going on?!?*” he yelled, grabbing her by the shoulders.

“Zidane... there’s probably a bomb inside her ship...” the princess replied, “Father’s been trying to warn you about it for hours, but he hasn’t been able to contact you, so...”

The genome stared at his friend in utter shock.

“A... *bomb..?*” he stammered, letting go of her. He felt ready to pass out.

“My team can defuse it, but I need to know her flight itinerary if we are to reach her in time!” the summoner replied.

“Yeah... sure...” Zidane mumbled, hobbling like a zombie towards the giant Mist Continent map on the wall. “Here... the red flags...”

Eiko approached the plan immediately and drew a measuring tape from one of her pockets.

“How long has it been since she left?” she asked, carefully studying Garnet’s route.

“Two hours and a half... give or take,” the king replied.

“Two hours and a half... okay...”

The summoner checked the map scale and started taking measurements while humming a tune. Hadn’t the genome known her since her childhood, he would have thought that she wasn’t taking the situation seriously.

“Alright... taking into account the Wind Rose’s cruise speed and the weather outside, I think that they must be roughly around... hmmm... *this area*.” the summoner declared, drawing an imaginary circle with her index over Gunitas Basin, “Okay, I must go now, Zid. We’ll save her, I swear it!”

“Wait! I-I’ll send another ship to escort you!” the king exclaimed.

“Heh... I don’t mean to be rude, but that would only slow me down,” Eiko replied with a smirk. “Trust me, I’ve got this. See ya!”

Having said that, she hastily left the war room.

“Dag...” the genome muttered, still in shock. His entire body was trembling and his legs threatened so badly to give under him that he had to sit on the floor for a moment. A purple, ethereal haze started dancing around him, and he clearly felt the monster inside him wake up and struggle with him for control.

“Not now... *not now...*” he mumbled, rocking back and forth like a scared child, “Focus, Zidane... not now... please, not now...”

“Let me handle this... you know you want to...” a distorted, almost demonic voice inside his head demanded.

“No... my people need me... my son needs me! I can’t lose control right now!” the genome grunted, pulling his hair.

“Come on, we’re one and the same... you *know* what needs to be done...” the beast retorted. Even if he couldn’t see it, Zidane knew that it was grinning madly at him.

“No! You’ve become... *too dangerous!* I can’t... trust you anymore!” the king stammered, trying to slow down his own breathing.

“Mark my words, coward: we’ll lose everything, and it will be entirely your fault!” the voice warned him before retreating back into the depths of his mind.

“Nggh..!” the genome winced, feeling his Trance gradually dissipate. *“Geez... it’s getting worse and worse every day... I need help...”*

March 29th, 1820, Radio Tower District,
Alexandria

13:20 P.M.

Trying to draw as little attention as possible, three military carriages drawn by armored chocobos headed down the city’s cobbled streets towards Alexandria’s radio tower.

“Wow... I’ve never been this close to it before.” Freya commented, peeking at the steel lattice colossus through one of the wagon’s barred windows.

“According to our experts, the illegal signal comes from a hijacked transmitter that should be in that building over there,” Beatrix said, handing the Burmecian a spotting scope and pointing at a large concrete structure located at the base of the tower. Its roof barely jutted out from behind the compound’s perimeter wall, and several windows were visible from the carriage’s position.

“Hmm...” the dragoon replied, scanning the area for hostiles. “Something’s off... I can’t see any signs of activity within the complex.”

“That’s what’s been bugging me,” Beatrix replied. “It’s like the entire place is deserted... I don’t like it at all.”

“... I could easily jump over that wall and open the gate for your troops,” Freya proposed, handing the general the scope. “If I encounter resistance, I’ll either deal with it or jump back out if I find myself overwhelmed.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Beatrix replied. The Burmecian’s wall-vaulting skills were *really* convenient, but she dreaded blindly sending her in, and without backup to boot. “Besides, what if our foes are compatriots of yours? Can you truly kill one of your own?”

“... I’ve been thinking about that for a long time, Beatrix...” Freya replied, staring at the helmet on her lap. “You’ve read Mikoto’s report on the mass-produced soul cores, haven’t you? Well... I’ve decided that even if I’m to fight my own kin, I can’t allow them to keep murdering people and stealing their souls. Besides, there are many paths to victory other than killing, you know? That’s why I’m here, to help prevent a pointless massacre.”

“... I understand,” the paladin said. She then cleared her throat as if to change the subject, but got interrupted by a nearby explosion.

BOOOM!

“Nngh! What the heck was that?!” Freya shouted, covering her ears. Her naturally sharp hearing coupled with Berlioz’s divine enhancements had amplified the already deafening noise *tenfold*, resulting in a nasty headache.

“We’re under attack!” Beatrix yelled, as the carriage behind theirs exploded after getting hit by a huge fireball.

“Rrrrrgh!” Freya grunted, gritting her teeth and pulling her ears down in a desperate attempt to make the pain stop.

“Crescent! We need to get outta here!” the paladin barked before a third detonation overturned their vehicle, sending the coachwoman flying and making the armored wagon land on its side.

...

“Beatrix, are you okay?” a distant voice called for her, *“Beatrix, answer me!”*

“Huh..?” the general mumbled, opening her eyes. She had bumped her head against the roof of the wagon and was now on top of Freya, who was frantically trying to wake her up. *“Crescent..? What..?”*

“Quiet! Look outside!” the Burmecian whispered, pointing at the carriage’s tiny front window. The paladin promptly got off her comrade and craned a look at the street through the barred opening.

“What the hell is *that..?*” she muttered, staring at a mechanical monstrosity that was inspecting an unconscious soldier. It was vaguely humanoid, standing hunched over like a feral beast, its body an intricate mass of clockwork pieces, jagged blades and armor plates. The poor knight made the fatal mistake of waking up under the golem’s gaze and it

proceeded to unceremoniously crush her skull under its clawed foot. “*Son of a..!*” Beatrix hissed, reaching for the hilt of her sword, but Freya quickly grabbed her arm and pointed upwards with her other hand. The general held her breath; another automaton was perched over their wagon and it was staring directly at them (or so it seemed) through the lateral window.

“*I don’t think it can see us...*” the Burmecian whispered, remaining as still as possible.

Without moving an inch, Beatrix looked at the street through the carriage’s back window. “... Two... three... four... there’s four of them...” she muttered.

“Listen up. I’ll blow that thing to smithereens with a spell. When I get out of the cart, wait a moment and then run back to the castle,” the dragoon said, activating her Dragon’s Crest.

“Are you crazy? I’m not leaving you alone with those monsters!” Beatrix replied a little louder than she meant to, accidentally drawing the creature’s attention.

“No time to argue! Cover your eyes!” Freya ordered, unleashing the souls trapped within her.

The spectral dragons punched through the wagon's wall and rammed the golem head-on, vaporizing most of it and sending what was left flying away. The rest of the automatons stared at the swirling pillar of spirits in confused silence until the largest one of the pack uttered some sort of distorted war cry and the three of them started running on all-fours towards the carriage.

“Mother Reis, give me strength!” Freya roared as she jumped out of the wagon, spear in hand. The first thing she noticed was that there were at least ten more androids perched on the nearby rooftops, so she targeted the closest one and threw her polearm at it, cleanly impaling it through the chest. The golem shrieked, contorting and spasming like a wounded animal. The dragoon landed on top of it with Burmecian precision and twisted the spear in a quick and brutal fashion, putting the creature out of its misery for good.

“They’re more fragile than they look...” Freya thought as she retrieved her weapon from the destroyed machine. The rest of the automatons immediately retaliated with a fireball salvo, but the dragoon had already jumped out of reach and was now perched on a nearby lamppost.

“*Oh, no..!*” she mumbled, realizing that the spell barrage had accidentally set several houses on fire. A cacophony of screams filled the air, as the burning bodies of those unlucky enough to get caught in the crossfire started raining from the balconies and onto the streets below. The sound of clashing steel brought Freya back to reality: Beatrix had refused to retreat, and was now fighting a three-on-one battle against the mechanical fiends

“*This is for Lena, you piece of scrap!*” the paladin roared as she deflected a slash aimed at her head and used the momentum to bury Save the Queen deep into her attacker’s torso. Without missing a beat, she ducked to avoid an attack from behind and ripped her sword out of its new ‘scabbard’ with a circular motion, releasing a gust of razor wind around her that cut the other two androids (and what was left of her carriage) in half. Freya immediately recognized the technique that had left her lying in a pool of her own blood twenty years ago. She gulped, realizing that the general *had actually held back* that time.

“*Beatrix, look out!*” the dragoon yelled as the golems on the rooftops switched their attention to the paladin and prepared to fire a new volley of spells.

“You know what to do, kiddo!” a familiar voice in the back of her mind whispered. *“Show’em what you’ve got!”*

“Grandpa..? Is that you..?” the Burmecian muttered. She then started charging her spear with raw energy until it glowed a bright, reddish hue, *“Okay... one shot... gotta make it count!”*

“Dammit! No escape!” Beatrix exclaimed, realizing that if she moved, the androids would end up bombarding the houses around her, killing dozens in the process. She raised her sword and adopted a defensive stance, *“Bring it on, monsters!”* she grunted, gritting her teeth. As she braced for impact, what seemed to be a stray arrow made of light exploded above her, unleashing a storm of ghostly flower petals over the entire area. The golems had less than a second to realize that they were under attack before they started igniting on contact with Freya’s magic.

“Beatrix! Get the wounded out of here now!” the dragoon barked, drawing a short dagger and returning to the rooftops with a powerful leap.

“Easier said than done...” the paladin thought, scanning her surroundings until she spotted an

abandoned wooden cart, “Alright, Crescent! Meet you at the district entrance!” she yelled.

March 29th, 1820, Town Square, Alexandria.

14:15 P.M.

“I can see the castle!” a little girl covered in ash yelled, leaving the band of survivors and running down the main street towards the royal plaza’s gate.

“Emma! Wait!” her mother shouted, chasing after her.

“We’re saved!” an old man exclaimed, also breaking formation. “Thank you, my general! Thank you, Freya of Burmecia! You’ve saved us all!”

Freya humbly nodded her head, preferring to save her breath. Despite her magical enhancements, she could feel her age starting to catch up with her.

“Oh, think nothing of it...” Beatrix said, pulling their improvised ambulance with the dragoon and two of her soldiers’ help. “*Whew... we’re finally*

here...” she thought as the town square’s guards left their posts and rushed to their aid.

“My general! Are you alright?!” one of the soldiers asked, performing the Alexandrian salute.

“We heard the explosions and feared for your lives, ma’am!” the other one exclaimed.

“At ease, soldiers. And thank you.” Beatrix replied, letting them take care of the cart, “How’s the situation in the rest of the city?”

“Things are looking grim, ma’am... the Market District and the Industrial District are completely overrun by the machines and they’re pushing us back towards the castle!” the knight explained. “His Majesty has ordered all hands on deck to gather the citizens of Alexandria. As soon as they’re all here, we’ll activate the inner barrier to isolate the royal district!”

“I don’t get it... how is this even possible?” Freya said, staring at the smoke columns rising in the distance, “Where did those things come from? How did they get past the city’s walls without us noticing?”

“I don’t know Crescent... but we need to find a way to neutralize them before they corner us here,”

the paladin replied

“Wait... is that Zidane..? What is he doing here?” the dragoon said, noticing the king’s presence among the refugees. He was giving orders to a group of knights and intermittently pointing at different places and people.

“Oh, that? Heh... he’s leading his people from the front lines.” Beatrix explained with a strange mixture of resignation and pride, “He does it all the time... drives me up the wall security-wise, but I find it admirable. In a way, he’s become a father to all of Alexandria.”

“I see...” Freya said, smiling tenderly. Seeing the genome in his element filled her with nostalgia; she remembered scolding him for his recklessness while also being deeply fond of him and his selfless heroism. It was no surprise that he would grow to be loved and followed by everyone around him.

“Freya?! Beatrix?! Girls, over here!” Zidane yelled as soon as he noticed them. He excused himself for a moment and started weaving his way through the crowd.

“*Heh... still as excitable as ever...*” the dragoon thought, finding the situation oddly reminiscent of

his *'return from the grave'*, but with the roles reversed.

"Geez, are you alright?!" the king exclaimed, checking the battered warriors for injuries, "I've sent a rescue team to find you! Where are they?"

"Much appreciated, sir." the general replied, saluting him, "I've ordered them to help with the evacuation of the other districts."

"You truly are a two-women army, aren't you?" the genome commented, "It's nice to see that you're okay... I was worried sick."

"Have I ever let you down, monkey-tail?" Freya cheekily replied.

"Festival of the Hunt, year 1800. That ring really came in handy though," Zidane retorted, "Seriously now, could you reach the tower? What happened to the rest of your squad?"

"We got ambushed on our way there... most of the girls perished during the initial attack." Beatrix replied in a broken voice. "Lena, Mia, Sophie, Hilda... they're all gone, sir..."

"Dammit... I'm sorry Bea..." the genome sighed, "We're losing people left and right... everyone here

has a missing friend or family member. It's a fucking nightmare..."

"That tower must have something to do with all this..." Freya commented, staring at the distant structure, "Do you think that if we shut it down, the machines will cease their attack?"

"I doubt it... Mikoto says that they're autonomous," Zidane replied. "And as if that wasn't bad enough, something's been trying to break into the city via Gargan Roo. We've closed the border gate, though, and we're ready to flood the tunnel if necessary."

"Gargan Roo..?!" Beatrix exclaimed, "That means that Treno is directly responsible for this! This is an act of war, sir!"

"Indeed, Bea, but we'll think about that later. Our priorities now are getting the people to safety and finding a way to deal with those golems," the king stated, "We've managed to capture a few. Mikoto is studying them, looking for weaknesses."

"Excellent! If someone can come up with a strategy to defeat them, that's her!" Freya said, trying to sound optimistic despite what her instincts were actually telling her.

“So, what should we do now, sir?” Beatrix asked, cracking her knuckles. “*Save the Queen itches for revenge...*” she thought.

“Now you two will go to that tent, eat something and we’ll plan our next move based on the intel we’ve gathered, okay?” Zidane dictated.

Beatrix frowned and opened her mouth to protest but her rumbling stomach cut her short, much to Freya’s amusement.

“Strange... I’ve always thought that you were made of marble, Beatrix,” the dragoon commented in a misguided attempt to lighten the mood.

“... Not now, Crescent!” the paladin brusquely replied, heading towards the command tent. The Burmecian glared at her, briefly contemplating giving her a piece of her mind, but finally decided against it out of pity and started making her way through the crowd.

Oblivious to the knights’ squabble, Zidane stared at the radio tower for a moment, lost in thought. “... *I wonder if you’re actually right, Freya...*”

March 29th, 1820, Gunitas Basin, Alexandria.

14:30 P.M.

“Hmm... North Gate should come into view any second now...” Garnet thought, staring at the distant Aerbs peaks from the Wind Rose’s main deck.

“Your Majesty, you shouldn’t be out here. You’ll catch a cold,” Steiner said, bringing the queen’s favorite shawl with him.

“Oh, thanks,” the summoner said, putting the warm cloth over her shoulders, “Adelbert... do you think everything will be alright?”

“I’m not sure, my queen...” the old knight replied, prompting Garnet to look at him with an alarmed expression, “But whatever that scoundrel has in store for us, we’ve already seen far worse.”

“...You’re probably right,” the monarch replied.

“Your Majesty!” the Wind Rose’s navigator exclaimed as he ran towards the duo, “There’s an airship tailing us! It seems to be the Quicksilver!”

“The Quicksilver..?” Garnet said, “What is it doing here..?”

“Hmm... I don’t like this...” Steiner commented, “We should ask Zidane if he sent it after us before lowering our guards...”

“Good idea, Adelbert,” Garnet replied, “Haagen, please contact my husband immediately. I’ll be there with you in a second.”

“At once, ma’am!” the Pluto Knight replied, saluting her before hurrying back to the command bridge. He wasn’t even close to it when a nearby detonation stunned him. The ship shook savagely from side to side, making him lose balance and fall on his backside. “*Wha-what is going..?!*”

Before he could finish his sentence, fire erupted from the bowels of the aircraft, ripping the door in front of him off its hinges and sending him tumbling backwards. Time itself seemed to slow down for Garnet as a chain of explosions started tearing the Wind Rose apart, engulfing everything in flames and throwing its crew into the abyss below.

“My queen!” Steiner yelled, desperately reaching for the summoner.

Garnet raised her hand, pointed her open palm at the blazing wall advancing towards her and closed her eyes.

...

Author's note:

This chapter was revised by Myshu, whom I'd like to thank for her invaluable help and support =)

I'd also like to thank the awesome folks that generously take the time to review my work and everyone who's still reading this story!

20. Vanished

March 29th, 1820, Gunitas Basin, Alexandrian territory.

15:00 PM

High above the clouds, the HSC *Madeen*, Eiko's customized airship, flew in search of the Wind Rose. It was a technological masterpiece, born from the combination of the summoner's prodigious arcane mastery and Cid's shipbuilding genius.

"Wait... what's that..?" Eiko said, squinting. Her heart skipped a beat; *two pitch-black smoke columns rose from a distant forest*. "No, no, no, no..!" she mumbled, brusquely steering the ship towards the shifting, dark plumes.

"Y-your Highness! You're sending us off course!" the second mate squeaked, alarmed by the sharp change in direction.

"I really hope you're right, Flynn..." the summoner replied in a wavering voice. "*Flank speed ahead!*"

“Flank speed ahead!” the chief engineer repeated.

The Madeen’s engine seemed to roar in response and the ship accelerated to its maximum speed. For several tense minutes, the crew remained silent as they approached the nearest crash site.

“Oh, gods...” the master-at-arms, a stout, armor-clad demi-hippo, muttered; The Wind Rose and the Quicksilver burned beneath them, twisted and mangled beyond recognition.

Eiko’s hands started shivering. Cold sweat ran down her spine as it dawned upon her that they were too late. *She* was too late.

Flynn cleared his throat, breaking the agonizing silence. “Um... what should we do now, ma’am?”

The summoner bit back a sob and shot a determined look at him.

“We look for survivors,” she said.

Earlier that day,

Professor Tot’s Laboratory, Alexandria Castle.

14:15 PM

“Alright, so, this goes here... and this goes... *here*,” Mikoto said, plugging the last connector into the disembodied golem torso. She then put its soul core back into the chest socket and watched the creature’s inner workings spring back to life.

“*Poor thing, you must be so confused without your sensors...*” the scientist thought, pitying the spirit that powered the infernal machine. Even if she knew that there was no time to lose, she couldn’t help thinking for a moment about the sheer pain and terror that it must have been going through.

“Hang in there, buddy. I promise we’ll set you free very soon...” she said with a compassionate smile, and then she extracted the tiny radio antenna from the robot’s ‘*heart*’.

“Okay... let’s see...” she mumbled, shifting her attention back to her portable computer’s screen. Lines and lines of encrypted code started appearing on it. She copied the unreadable text and compared it to a previously saved sequence, trying to spot differences between them. “*Alright... so you run a different section of your code whenever you’re not*

exposed to the radio signal...” she thought. “This must mean that you have an inbuilt AI to guide you in case you’re out of the transmitter’s range...”

The torso wobbled a little, trying to escape its confinement. It seemed not to realize that its limbs had been detached and removed, as its joints’ servos kept turning over and over in a futile attempt to use them.

BEEP BEEP BEEP!

Mikoto stared at the ringing beeper in shock for a few seconds and then scrambled for it, almost tripping over in the process.

“Sweet mother of science!” she yelled, holding the device with both hands; Kal had finally managed to crack the encryption. She pocketed the gizmo and left the laboratory running, almost knocking over a passing knight on her way to her ship.

March 29th, 1820, Town Square, Alexandria.

14:45 PM

“Uh... h-hello, *sir..?*” a young boy mumbled, studying the rotund cook that was serving lunch to the refugees; he had never seen a Qu in his life and Quina’s bizarre appearance intimidated him quite a bit.

“HELLO, LITTLE ONE!” the Qu cheerfully greeted him, filling a wooden bowl to the brim with steaming hedgehog pie stew and handing it to him. “HERE, THIS MAKE YOU GROW STRONG!”

“T-thank you, sir!” the kid stammered, sampling the pottage’s delicious aroma, “Oh, man! This smells so good!”

“TRADITIONAL QU RECIPE! ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES!” the strange chef declared, gently patting the boy on the head, “NEXT!”

The child left and a middle-aged woman took his place. She was exquisitely dressed, of noble origin, and was visibly offended by having to wait in line surrounded by commoners.

“... Make it quick, creature,” she sneered, haughtily avoiding the cook’s gaze.

Quina served the noblewoman’s meal without a word and extended the bowl to her with the Qu equivalent of a deep frown.

“Ugh, what is this *filth*..?” she said, staring at the reddish pottage as if it was some kind of practical joke. “Is that *peasant-born monkey* mocking us or something?”

“HE GIVING YOU FREE FOOD AND SHELTER,” the chef retorted, threateningly looming over the improvised counter, “NOW LEAVE, ME HAVE HUNGRY PEOPLE TO FEED.”

“Free food? With the taxes I pay, I should be getting caviar for lunch, *thing*...” the woman spat, leaving the line and sitting near the other nobles.

“*Good grief... sometimes I miss the marsh so much...*” Quina thought, taking a deep breath. “NEXT!”

“*This sure brings back memories...*” Freya thought, staring at her empty bowl with a satisfied grin. Despite her talent at potion-brewing, cooking definitely wasn’t her forte and neither Zidane had ever been skilled at it. By the time Quina first joined them back in the day, even Vivi had grown outwardly reluctant to eat their *creations*. Needless to say, they all rejoiced when the Qu turned out to be a magnificent chef.

“Hey, Freya...” Beatrix said in a low voice, leaving her half-finished meal on the table.

“Yes, Beatrix?” the Burmecian replied, shooting her a bemused look; it was the first time in years that the paladin had called her by her first name.

“... Sorry for what I said out there. It was rude and unnecessary,” the general said, letting out a disheartened sigh, “It’s just... I’ve trained those girls since they were teenagers. Seeing them getting slaughtered like that...”

“I’m sorry for your loss...” Freya said, lowering her eyes. “They seemed like honorable warriors.”

“They were like daughters to me...” Beatrix said, suddenly looking much older and tired than usual.

“We’ll honor their sacrifice by stopping whoever is behind this,” the dragon knight declared, offering the general her hand.

“I don’t get it... why are you being so nice to me?” the general asked, blankly staring at Freya’s callused palm. “You, of all people, shouldn’t care about how I feel.”

“Even if we were still enemies, I would not mock your pain,” the Burmecian replied with a smirk.

“Besides, you’re only trying to protect your people. I can empathize with that.”

“Heh... I would have loved to meet you under different circumstances, Freya,” Beatrix said, accepting the dragoon’s handshake. “I’m honored to fight alongside such a fine knight.”

“Am I interrupting something?” Zidane chimed in, barging into the command tent with an amused smirk. “Oh, please don’t mind me, it’s so cute to see you holding hands like that.”

“How are things going out there?” Freya replied, letting his snark slide. “I’m ready to help with whatever you need.”

“Well, there’s some people I want you to meet,” the genome said, “Careful, though; we don’t know ’em well enough to be sure of where their loyalties lie. Come with me, please.”

The dragon knight stood up with a perplexed expression and followed his friend out of the tent. A small group of Burmecians was patiently waiting for them not too far away. They were armed with spears and seemed ready for combat.

“Squad! Attention!” the tallest dragoon of the bunch exclaimed, solemnly saluting Freya. The rest

of the warriors immediately fell in line and followed his order. “Ma’am, Sir Erik Osbern, reports!”

“They’ve helped us secure an evacuation route for the Burmecian district,” Zidane explained. “When they saw you arrive with that group of survivors, they requested to be put under your command.”

“Oh... at ease, then, brave knight.” Freya replied, returning the salute.

“We refuse to believe what Ulrich’s been saying about you and Lord Fratley!” the warrior exclaimed with military vehemence. “We shall protect you and this kingdom with our lives, ma’am!”

“Thank you. That’s very kind of you.” Freya said, humbly nodding her head. “How’s the situation on Little Burmecia, Sir Osbern? Could you manage to bring everyone here?”

“Fortunately, our district was left largely untouched by the machines, ma’am,” Erik said. “However, entire families have inexplicably vanished, and one of our friends’ daughter has gone missing, too.”

“Vanished, huh..?” Zidane said, folding his arms. “Do you think the golems took them?”

“Hardly, Your Majesty. Those things take no prisoners,” the knight replied. “I don’t think they’re even *capable* of doing anything beyond killing!”

“Hmm... I’m not so sure about that...” Freya said, rubbing her chin. “They’ve used ambush tactics against us. Also, they seem to understand the difference between infantry and artillery. Those machines are smarter than we give them credit for, Sir Osbern.”

“Are you saying that they can *think*, Freya?” the king asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, I’m just saying that they’re *organized*,” she replied, pointing at the radio tower in the distance. “And I bet my tail that whoever’s giving them orders is hiding right *there*.”

“*Guuuuuuuys!*” Mikoto yelled, running towards the group with her portable computer under her arm. The genome scientist skidded to a halt and took a brief moment to catch her breath.

“Whoa, Miko, what are you doing here? Are you okay?” Zidane asked.

“Meeting. *Now!*” she answered.

“So, Freya was right after all!” Zidane exclaimed. “If we take back the tower, we’ll win this battle!”

“It’s not that easy...” Mikoto replied, showing her computer’s screen to him. “What you’re seeing is their combat AI; it’s independent from the signal, which means that they’ll keep attacking us even if we disable the transmitter.”

“So, how do we stop them?” Beatrix asked.

“Treno has already solved that problem for us,” the genome scientist replied with a satisfied smirk. She started scrolling down the code until she found a particular line and highlighted it. “*This* is their deactivation command. If we broadcast this from the tower, their entire army will shut down at once!”

“... Are you serious? Why would they give their own weapons such a flagrant weakness?” Freya asked, utterly baffled by the idea.

“It’s not a weakness; *it’s a feature.*” Mikoto declared matter-of-factly. “We’ve all witnessed how deadly this beings are. Failing to hardwire such a vital function into them would be *suicidal.*”

“I see... they weren’t expecting you to be here, let alone crack their code.” Zidane added, rubbing his chin. “We just got lucky, eh?”

“Indeed,” Beatrix replied. “Alright, I’ll get a team ready. We’ll storm that tower and beat Bishop at her own game.”

“I’m coming too,” Mikoto said. “You’ll need me to operate the transmitter.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, now... hold on a second!” the king brusquely intervened. “This is a *warzone* we’re talking about, Miko! You’ve never been in a fight before, let alone a *battlefield*!”

“Military theory was a part of my training back in Terra. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine,” Mikoto replied, folding her arms.

“Theory and practice are not the same thing, Miko!” Zidane exclaimed. “Dozens of warriors have died today! You’ll just end up like them!”

“My skills have vastly improved, brother! You witnessed it yourself the other day; I’m not a helpless child anymore!” the scientist retorted. “Besides, Freya and Beatrix will keep me safe! We can do th-!”

Even to Freya’s heightened senses, Zidane’s reaction to his sister’s tirade appeared like a *fleeting blur*; he had dashed across the tent in less than a fraction of a second and stopped inches away from

Mikoto's face. The scientist's legs gave way beneath her and she fell on her backside, paralyzed by fear.

"*Zidane! Have you lost your mind?!*" the Burmecian barked, but the king completely ignored her.

"You. Are *not*. Ready." Zidane stated in a terrifying, distorted voice.

"*Brother...*" Mikoto mumbled, staring into his glowing red eyes. "You look just like *him* right now..."

Zidane's ferocious expression evaporated as he stared at his hands in silent shock; reddish arcs of energy sparked and crackled between his fingers, quickly dissipating into the air.

"Your Majesty... *are you alright..?*" Beatrix asked, carefully approaching the genomes.

Zidane's heart accelerated; he had to make a choice, and he needed to do it *quick*.

"... Yes," he lied. "I'm just... worried for you all."

He knew he was buying time, he knew it would all come back to haunt him later, but what would they gain if he told them about the bomb? Throwing

his team off-balance could lead to them getting distracted and thus, killed. He wasn't going to run that risk, even if he hated himself for it.

“Miko... I'm so sorry for what I just did,” he said, offering her his hand. She accepted it and let him help her stand up.

“Brother, you need to understand,” the scientist pleaded, holding Zidane's hand. “I know you're scared, I'm scared too, but unless you have another Terran-speaking programmer working for you, we have no choice.”

The king felt a shiver run down his spine as he stared into his sister's eyes; *he saw himself arguing with Baku twenty years ago.*

“Huh..?” he mumbled, slightly startled; Freya had gently placed her hand on his shoulder.

“We'll keep her safe,” she said, giving him that little, old-friend smile that he could never say no to.

“They'll have to go through us both if they want to touch her, sir.” Beatrix declared with a confident smirk.

“... Thank you, girls,” the king muttered, and then he pulled Mikoto into a tight embrace.

“Brother, you embarrass me!” the scientist chuckled, hugging him back.

“Sorry. I’m just so proud of you...” Zidane replied, letting her go after a brief moment.

“Alright, we need a plan,” Beatrix stated, staring at the city map on the table.

“Hmm... I think I have an idea...” Freya said, shooting a knowing look at Mikoto.

March 29th, 1820, Gunitas Basin, Alexandrian territory.

15:30 PM

“Alright, boys, listen up!” the Madeen’s master-at-arms exclaimed, addressing her squad. “We’ve requested backup from Dali but, unluckily for us, their nearest ship is an hour from here, so we’re on our own. Our prime objective is to reach the Wind Rose’s crash site and extract any survivors that we can find. We’ll then move on to the Quicksilver’s wreckage and continue our search. Mist creatures

are known to still lurk in forests like this one, so stay alert at all times if you value your lives!”

“With all due respect, are you sure this is a good idea, ma’am?” the youngest soldier of the team asked, fearfully clutching his war hammer. “Shouldn’t we wait until help arrives? I mean... I’ve heard stories...”

“Are you questioning a direct order from the princess, private?” the armor-clad demi-hippo shouted, making him shrink in his place.

“Guys, come on, let’s all calm down for a second,” Eiko said, facing her team. “I know you’re scared, but this is far greater than us. The fate of the entire continent might depend on what we do during the next few hours. We can’t afford to waste any more time.”

“You’ve heard her, boys! Now soldier up and protect Her Highness at all costs!” the stout officer ordered, punching a red button on the wall and deploying the ship’s airstair. “Alright, team, let’s move out!”

One, if not *the* nastiest effect of Iifa Tree's mist was the mutation of Gaia's wildlife into a horde of ravenous predators. Traveling by foot during those times had always been ill-advised at best; that's why stepping into a dark forest like the one they were traversing filled the improvised rescue team with an insidious sense of dread.

"It's so quiet..." one of the soldiers whispered. "Why is it so quiet..?"

"Listen... there are no birds!" another one answered, "This place is seriously creeping me out, mate."

"What do you think, ma'am?" the master-at-arms whispered, careful not to be heard by her unit.

"There's something really wrong about this forest, Dionne." Eiko replied, eyes scanning the environment. "I can sense no spiritual force, though. That's both good and bad news for us."

"How so?"

"Good news: everything but the plants is dead. Bad news: everything but the plants is dead," the summoner replied. "Question is: what killed all the animals?"

“We should stay on our toes then.” Dionne added. “We’re close, I can smell it.”

Effectively, the scent of smoke and ash was getting stronger and stronger with each step they took. Eiko could feel her heart shrink; she wasn’t ready to see the wreckage, but she needed to know if her lifelong friend and sister figure had somehow survived the crash.

They walked for what felt like an eternity, until the master-at-arms signaled the rest of the team to stop and hide. She then took point and disappeared into the foliage, war hammer in hand.

“*Where did she go?*” one of the troopers whispered, overwhelmed by anxiety.

“She must have heard something...” another one replied. “Will she be okay on her own?”

“Have you ever seen Major Dionne in a fight, Mark?,” a third, older soldier chimed in. “I’m more worried for the monsters!”

“*Quiet!*” Eiko hissed, eyes fixed on the dense grove ahead. The sound of rustling leaves and heavy footsteps caught her attention. She drew her enchanted flute and signaled the rest of the squad to prepare for trouble.

“Your Highness...” the master-at-arms said as she emerged from the bushes, much to everyone’s relief. “You need to see this...”

“We’re screwed...” one of the soldiers mumbled, staring in awe at the gruesome spectacle at his feet. “We’re so screwed...”

Scattered across a strangely shaped clearing, the fresh remains of a massacre confirmed Eiko’s suspicions about the forest. Shredded pieces of armor, teeth and cloth painted a grisly picture of what that cursed place had in store for its visitors and the summoner seriously considered for a second retreating and waiting for the cavalry to arrive.

“Burmecians...” Major Dionne stated, studying a broken helmet. Something big and jagged had punched right through it, killing its owner with a single blow.

“What were they doing here..?” Eiko muttered, picking up a worn leather patch with a familiar coat of arms emblazoned on it.

“If Ulrich is Bishop’s ally against Queen Garnet, then they were probably *finishing the job*,” Dionne

replied. “Luckily for us, something killed them before we arrived and then dragged their corpses deeper into the forest.”

“Major, look! Over here!” the oldest soldier of the squad interrupted her, pointing at a nearby bush.

“What is it, Vega?” the master-at-arms replied, approaching him. A lone piece of delicate white fabric was stuck in the brambles. She swallowed hard; *there was a bloodstain on it.*

“Your Highness... I think you need to see this...”

21. Stranded

**March 29th, 1820, Generator Room, Southern
Radio Tower, Alexandria.**

15:20 P.M.

“Hmph! Mmmf! Mmmmf!”

“Oh, will you shut the fuck up, *brat?!?*”

Ari paused for a second, shot a fiery glare at her captor, and started wiggling and kicking her feet once again, trying to free herself.

“Can’t you understand that those are fucking mythrils wires, kid? *You’re only pissing me off!*” the albino Burmese barked, exasperated by the little girl’s stubbornness.

“Hmmmf! Mffmmmf!” Ari replied, desperately trying to spit her gag, much to the albino’s annoyance.

“Okay, listen up, you little *bitch!*” he yelled. “If I let you talk, will you stop getting on my nerves?!”

The girl in red stopped moving and nodded her head three times.

“*Geez, kids these days are impossible!*” the kidnapper muttered as he reached for Ari’s gag. “There, what the hell do you want?”

“Where’s Soren?! What did you do to him, you monster?!” she shrieked, baring her small incisors in a childish attempt to intimidate him.

“I only took him back to his family, you little shit!” the kidnapper replied, staring her down with his only working eye. “If you hadn’t jeopardized his extraction, you wouldn’t be tied to a shit-ton of explosives right now!”

“... *W-what?!*” Ari squeaked. She stopped moving at once and stared at the other blocks stuck to the walls, finally understanding what they were. Faint red lights came from tiny magical stones lodged in them and, worst of all, they were all connected to her through extremely thin metallic wires. “W-why? Why are you doing this?”

“An eye for an eye, missy,” the albino replied, removing his wide brimmed hat. Ari gasped; not only was he missing an eye and chunks of his ears,

but his entire head was nothing but a deformed mass of scar tissue.

“*Ahhh!* Somebody help me, please! *Heeelp!*” she screamed, completely terrified.

“What the hell is going on here?” an armor-clad figure boomed, stepping into the room. He seemed to be human, but Ari wasn’t sure about it, as his attire completely obscured his features. To complicate matters further, his helmet distorted his voice, giving it an unnaturally low pitch. “Yeesh, Horik! Put that thing back on! You’re scaring the kid!”

“Heh... my bad,” the Burmecian replied, hiding his disfigured scalp under his hat once again.

“The fleet is near. They should be here in an hour, so get ready for extraction,” the armored stranger stated.

“About godsdamn time!” Horik exclaimed. “We’ve fucked ’em up real good, eh Red?”

“You kidding? One day, people will *study* what we did to these suckers!” Red answered, letting out a satisfied chuckle.

“Heh! Damn right!” the Burmecian said. “Okay, I’ll go run a quick perimeter check and then I’ll get my stuff ready. See you in a couple minutes.”

“Good. Just don’t get yourself killed,” Red said as Horik passed him by. He then stared at Ari for a moment through his glowing visor, sending shivers down her spine.

“P-please, don’t hurt me...” she pleaded, unnerved by his almost featureless helmet; she wondered if he even *had* a face under all that metal.

“Listen to me, kiddo...” the man replied, approaching her and picking up the discarded gag from the floor. “I won’t make you wear this again, but you’ll have to promise not to scream anymore, okay?”

Ari nodded her head repeatedly.

“Good girl,” Red said. “Stay quiet, and we’ll set you free very soon.”

“O-okay...” the little Burmecian said, watching him leave. She listened to the sound of his footsteps until she was sure that he was gone, and only then did she remember how to breathe. Her eyes started welling up as it dawned upon her that never seeing

Soren or her father again had just become a very real possibility.

“... *Stop, you weakling... true dragoons never cry...*” she sobbed as her vision got blurrier and blurrier.

**March 29th, 1820, Lebender Forest, Gunitas
Basin, Alexandria.**

16:15 P.M.

“She’s alive...” Eiko said, holding the bloodstained cloth with a quivering hand. “She’s alive, and she’s in trouble!”

“Are you sure it belongs to her, ma’am?” one of her soldiers asked.

“White silk’s not a very dragoonish thing to wear, don’t you think?” the summoner replied, extending the cloth to Major Dionne. “Would you hold it for a second, please?”

“Um, yeah, sure ma’am,” the demi-hippo replied, a little confused. “What do you want me to do with

it?”

“Try not to get your hand chomped off,” Eiko said, and then she started playing a tune on her flute; it was vaguely reminiscent of a wolf’s howl.

Major Dionne had witnessed Eiko’s summoning powers several times in the past, and was even fond of the adorable, yet somewhat temperamental Carbuncle, but *Fenrir* was a completely different story; he terrified her on a primal level, and suddenly there he was, standing right next to her in all his supernatural glory.

“*What do you need, master?*” the Eidolon’s voice boomed inside Eiko’s mind. She was the only one in the world who could ‘hear’ him thanks to having kept her summoner’s horn despite its many political disadvantages.

“*There’s a summoner lost in this forest, and I need you to track her down. Will you help us, O noble spirit?*” the princess replied through their shared mind link.

“*I’m not a dog, Eiko Carol. I just happen to look like one,*” Fenrir replied dryly, letting out a snarl that scared the bejeezus out of the entire squad.

“Please, only you can do this!” Eiko pleaded. *“I know! Lead us to our friend and I’ll wear that horrible perfume you love for a week! Deal?”*

“... You offend me, woman; I’m above extorting my own summoner!” the Eidolon stated, haughtily tipping his snout. He sighed after a few seconds and gave her the canine equivalent of an exasperated look. *“Alright... I’ll do it, but just because you asked nicely.”*

“Really?! Oh, thanks, Fenrir! You’re the goodest of boys!” Eiko piped up, much to the giant wolf’s chagrin.

“... Don’t make me regret my decision...” he replied. The summoner could almost feel him mentally facepalming.

“Sorry... it’s like a reflex,” the princess replied, nodding her head apologetically. *“Dionne, would you please show Fenrir the cloth?”*

“R-right away, ma’am...” the master-at-arms stammered, extending the bloodstained item to the Eidolon. He sniffled it a few times, cold ectoplasmic drool splashing over the demi-hippo’s hand and turning into mist. She would *never* get used to him.

“Your friend has left quite a noticeable trail behind...” the wolf telepathically stated, staring at a hidden path leading deeper into the forest. *“It reeks of magic, too. She’s been spell-casting.”*

“Can you tell all that through smell?” Eiko marveled. *“I can’t feel anything at all!”*

“Being made of flesh limits your perception, I’m afraid,” Fenrir stated. He then sniffled the ground near the brambles for a while and then gave her a worried look. *“Your friend is not alone... two magic users are with her.”*

“Wait, what? Which kind of magic are we talking about?” the princess mentally blurted out.

“One of the trails literally oozes human spiritual energy... ugh... it smells terribly...” the Eidolon replied, visibly disgusted.

“That’s probably Steiner!” Eiko exclaimed. *“Even his aura stinks when he empowers himself with magic! He must be with her!”*

“About the other one... I sense a mixture of ectoplasm and... dragon magic,” Fenrir said, angrily wrinkling his snout. *“Whatever that thing is, it’s no Eidolon.”*

“Shit! Can you lead us to them?”

“Follow me!” Fenrir ordered, disappearing into the foliage.

“He’s found Garnet, and she’s in danger!” Eiko barked, chasing after the giant wolf.

“You’ve heard her, boys! *Go, go, go!*” Major Dionne shouted, following the summoner deeper into the forest.

16:30 P.M.

“The scent grows stronger! We’re close!” Fenrir’s voice boomed inside Eiko’s mind.

“She’s near, guys! Don’t fall behind!” the summoner yelled, nimbly chasing after the Eidolon despite the extremely rough terrain.

“Easy for you to say it... you’re not wearing armor!” the youngest of the soldiers thought, panting heavily due to the strain and heat.

“There!” Fenrir exclaimed, stopping suddenly and pointing with his snout at a cave entrance hidden among the trees.

“I can’t thank you enough for this, buddy,” Eiko said through the mind link, stroking the Eidolon’s radiant fur.

“I wouldn’t celebrate just yet...” the giant wolf replied. *“This place reeks of human blood. We might be too late.”*

Eiko gasped and stared at the dark opening in the stone. *“Garnet?! Garnet!”* she yelled, impulsively running towards it.

“Your Highness, wait!” Major Dionne yelled, chasing after the princess.

With a powerful leap, the Eidolon interposed himself between his master and the cave, stopping the summoner dead in her tracks.

“What are you doing, Fenrir?” Eiko yelled.

“Something’s wrong. Wait here, I’ll tell you if it’s safe inside,” he answered. The giant wolf then entered the cave, disappearing into the darkness.

“What should we do, ma’am?” the demi-hippo asked, preemptively drawing her weapon.

“He told us to wait outside,” the princess replied. “For all his big bad wolf attitude, he’s actually a complete softie...”

A sharp thud, followed by a high-pitched yelp echoed from deep within the tunnel. Eiko and Dionne stared at each other, eyes wide open.

“*Fenrir! Are you okay?!*” the summoner telepathically asked.

“How do you like this, you filthy beast?!” a familiar voice boomed inside the cavern, followed by a loud **thwack**.

“*Ngh! That rust bucket you call friend is here, Eiko!*” Fenrir snarled through the mind link. “*Make him stop or I’ll... ack! Get off me, human!*”

“Steiner, is that you?!” the princess yelled, rushing to her spirit companion’s aid. “Steiner, stop! You’re hurting him!”

“*No, he’s not!*” Fenrir squawked, trying to save face.

WHACK!

“*Augh! My ear!*” the giant wolf telepathically bellowed. “*Now you’ve really done it, vermin! Take this!*”

“Lady Eiko..? Is that y-?” the Pluto Knight said before the Eidolon smashed him against the wall with a resounding *clang*. “*Oof! Not fair!*”

“Guys, could you please *stop?!?*” the summoner shrieked, entering the damp chamber where her two friends were fighting.

“Lady Eiko, it’s really you!” Steiner exclaimed, getting back up from the ground. “Oh, thank goodness! What are you doing here?”

“What do you think I’m doing here? I’m saving your ass!” the princess barked, assessing Fenrir’s wounds. “Sorry for that, buddy... do you need help with the pain?”

“*I’ll live...*” the Eidolon huffed, licking a cut on his leg.

“Princess! Don’t run off on your own like that!” the demi-hippo exclaimed, barging into the chamber, war hammer in hand. “*General Steiner..? You’re alive!*”

“Major Dionne! Long time no see!” the Pluto Knight piped up, saluting her.

“Oh, sorry, *where are my manners?*” the master-at-arms stammered, nervously returning the salute.

“I’m glad you’re fine, sir!”

“I’m so confused! How did you know that we were stranded here?” Steiner asked, staring at the summoner in utter disbelief.

“It’s a *very* long story. I’ll tell you when we’re outta here, I promise,” Eiko replied. “Where’s Garnet? Is she okay?”

Steiner’s candid smile evaporated, and a somber expression took its place.

“She saved our lives... but ended up sustaining grievous injuries in the process,” the Pluto Knight replied, his wrinkled visage wreathed in shadows. “Come with me. With you here, there might still be hope for her.”

...

“Your Majesty! Look who’s here!”

“... *huh..?*”

“Oh *gods*, Garnet... what happened to you..?”

“... *that voice... who are you..?*”

“It’s me, Eiko! I-I’ll fix you up in no time! Dionne, bring my stuff, please!”

“Eiko... yes... I remember someone... someone called...”

“Save your strength, sis! Steiner, hold her hand and keep her awake, talk to her!”

“Y-yes! M-my queen, can you hear me? It’s me, Adelb...”

“Father..? Is that you..?”

“Uhh...”

“Don’t just stare at me, Steiner! She thinks you’re her father! Be her father!”

“Am I... dying..?”

The Pluto Knight had to bite back a sob to answer that question.

“... Of course not, my dear. Everything will be alright, I promise.”

“She’s lost too much blood... we can’t remove the shrapnel like this... Steiner, hold her down! Dionne, Elixir, now!”

“O-okay! Darling, this will hurt a little, but it will make you feel better...”

“Father... please, don’t leave me...”

“Administering Elixir...”

“I’ll never, ever leave you, my dear.”

“Huh..? W-what is this..?! Oh, gods, it burns! Aaaaah!”

“It’s okay, it’s okay... hold my hand, I’m here for you...”

“The hemorrhage subsides! Hang on just a little longer, sis!”

“Did you hear that, darling? You’re gonna be fine! You’re gonna... Garnet..? *Garnet! Eiko, what’s going on?!*”

“Shit! She’s having a seizure! Help me roll her onto her side! Careful with her neck!

...

“Tell... mother... I said hi...”

...

“Huh..? Where am I..?” Garnet said, opening her eyes. The golden sunlight made her blink a few times until her vision adjusted to it. She found herself sitting under a large cherry tree’s shade in a beautiful garden. A delicate petal, carried by the breeze, landed on her lap. “*What is this place..?*” she muttered, carefully picking it up.

“So, we finally meet, Queen Garnet...” a deep female voice said, prompting the summoner to look around, searching for its source.

“... *Freya?* Is that you?” Garnet said, as a familiar silhouette came into focus.

The Burmecian chuckled.

“You flatter me... but no,” she said, approaching her. “I’m her mother, Frigg.”

The summoner’s jaw dropped. She glanced at her own chest, and then back at the Burmecian in utter disbelief. Frigg smiled at this small gesture and clapped her hands a few times.

“Bravo!” she exclaimed. “You’ve figured out the secret of the necklace faster than I expected. Well done!”

“A summoning beacon...” Garnet muttered, holding Freya’s pendant in her hand.

“You could call it that way,” Frigg said. “I can only interact with your realm through the things that I was strongly attached to in life. Alas!”

“So it was you..! The woman who led me to Steiner!” the queen said, connecting the dots. “You saved my life!”

“It was the least I could do. You saved my daughter’s life, and you have my eternal gratitude for that,” the Burmecian stated, extending her hand to the summoner. “Shall we go for a walk? There are a few matters I’d like to discuss with you.”

“S-sure thing...” Garnet said, letting Frigg help her stand up.

17:40 P.M.

Once Eiko and Steiner managed to stabilize Garnet, they spent the following hour catching up, always keeping an eye on the queen in case further

complications arose. Having fulfilled his task, Fenrir had returned to his realm, leaving Dionne and her squad in charge of patrolling the tunnels. The sun still shined outside, but they all knew that soon they would need to leave, before whatever lurked out there cornered them in such tight quarters.

“So that’s how you two survived...” Eiko commented. “I can’t believe she managed to aim a Float spell at you while free falling and with her body pumped full of shrapnel to boot...”

Steiner stared at the unconscious queen with a mixture of pride and sorrow.

“Her Majesty is just that powerful and selfless. There’s no greater honor than to serve her,” he stated.

“Hmm... the fact that she’s been conscious for hours after losing *that* much blood still strikes me as an absurd feat of fortitude...” Eiko stated. “Did she use healing magic on herself?”

“Not that I know...” Steiner answered, returning to idly sharpening his broadsword. “Something started following us while we searched for a safe place to rest. She shot a couple magic bolts at it to scare it away, but that’s about it.”

“Something *followed* you? What did it look like?” the blue-haired summoner asked, her eyes wide open.

“Well... we couldn’t tell clearly, as it always kept its distance, but judging by how easily Her Majesty chased it away, it must have been a Mu, or something similar.”

“A *Mu*? Why would a Mu stalk you like that?”

“I have no idea...” Steiner lamely replied, lifting his sword and looking at his own torchlit reflection. “Lady Eiko, I need to know the truth... do you think she’ll make it?”

“It’s... complicated,” she replied. “I’m almost out of medicines and there’s only so much an Esuna spell can do if we can’t safely remove the shrapnel from her body.”

“I could go back to the Wind Rose’s wreckage and scavenge for supplies. Would that help?” the Pluto Knight proposed.

“That’s both sweet and ballsy as hell, but no... she needs antibiotics and actual surgery, and she needs ’em now,” Eiko replied. “If she stays here, that infection will kill her in less than twenty four hours.”

“Okay... what do you suggest, then?” Steiner impatiently asked, planting the Ragnarok in the mud. “There must be a way to save her life!”

Eiko’s eyes widened all of a sudden.

“*Life..?* Life!” she exclaimed. “Steiner, that’s it! You’re a genius!”

“Am I..?” the burly knight confusedly asked.

“Yeah! We’ll use Phoenix to send a distress signal to my crew!” the summoner yelled. “His magic should also give Garnet the boost she needs to survive the trip to Alexandria! It’s perfect!”

“Splendid idea, Lady Eiko!” Steiner boomed. “Besides, there might be other survivors scattered across these woods. Your Eidolon should alert them to our position!”

“I wouldn’t bet my money on it...” the princess stated with a somber expression. “After your ship crashed, a group of Burmecian soldiers entered the forest looking for you. They got butchered *in seconds* by... *something*, not too far from here. I don’t think we’ll be finding any stranded crew members, Steiner.”

The Pluto Knight folded his arms and stared pensively at the unconscious queen.

“No one gets left behind...” he said. “That’s Her Majesty’s motto. That’s Alexandria’s motto. I don’t know how things are done in Lindblum, but I’m not abandoning the crew if there’s a chance that they’re still alive.”

“... Alrighty then,” Eiko sighed. “If you wanna die *that* badly, I’ll help you contact the Dali ship that should be searching for us right now. From then on, you’ll be on your own, Captain Hero, for I’m taking Garnet straight to Alexandria. *Capisce?*”

“Thank you,” Steiner replied, smiling warmly at her. “I knew you would understand.”

“Your Highness!” one of the soldiers yelled, barging into the damp chamber. He was extremely pale, panting heavily and covered in sweat.

“Mark? What happened?!” Eiko exclaimed, already guessing what he was going to say.

“T-they’ve found us!” he stammered. “We’re surrounded!”

22. Unleashed

March 29th, 1820, Town Square, Alexandria.

15:50 P.M.

Freya hated farewells with a passion.

Losing loved ones had been a painful constant in her life, with the added bonus of *always* being the one left behind. This time around, however, the roles had been reversed. As the mystical barrier intended to shield the population separated them, Zidane's expression hit a little too close to home for her. *She knew exactly how it felt*, to watch the people she cared about walk away to an uncertain fate.

"*Dragon pals*," she mouthed at him, letting Beatrix and the others get ahead of her.

The genome let out a small chuckle.

"... *Dragon pals*," he answered, winking at her.

Freya nodded, rested her spear on her shoulder and headed toward the burning city.

She hated farewells with a passion.

“The fire spreads. If we don’t act fast, there won’t be anything left to save...” Beatrix said, staring at the dense plumes of smoke rising above the Alexandrian skyline. She had brought with her the survivors of her unit as support, and Freya could feel in the way they gripped their weapons the hatred that boiled within them.

“Alright, team, as we’ve previously discussed, we’ll take point and secure the rooftops, so the ground team can move forward with minimal risk,” the Burmecian explained, addressing her ragtag dragoon squad. “Our priority is to keep Mikoto safe. If she goes down, it’s over for us, so stay sharp. Do you have any questions?”

The five lancers remained in respectful silence, backs straightened and spears firmly planted on the ground. Three of them had been knights in the past, and the rest consisted of a retired bodyguard and a young squire. Through discreet use of Mikoto’s abilities, Freya had made sure they weren’t actually double agents, and with her as their new leader, they had vowed to protect the people within the barrier.

Six dragons. She hoped the number wasn't some kind of omen.

“Good. Let us go forth,” she said.

**March 29th, 1820, Market District,
Alexandria.**

16:05 P.M.

With the dragoon squad watching for threats from above, Beatrix's team advanced through the ravaged market district as quietly as possible. The golems patrolled the main streets, so they had to use the alleyways and less known passages to remain unnoticed.

At a certain point, Freya signaled the general's group to hide, so they took shelter inside a destroyed shop.

“*Oh, no...*” Beatrix muttered, recognizing the place. The windows had been smashed, and the entire room reeked of sulfur and death. The wooden floor was charred and covered in deep scratches, yet

what caught her eye the most were the myriad round holes in the walls, as if a Cactuar had sprayed them with needles. *Inch-thick needles.*

“*Grandma Olson’s Delights...*” Mikoto whispered, reading a hanging sign near the counter. “A bakery...”

“In times of hardship, the Olsons would always volunteer to help us feed the hungry,” the general stated. “To meet such an unfair end... are we doomed to repeat history over and over again..?”

“*Why would they do this..?*” the genome mumbled, horrified by the scene. “*What is Treno trying to achieve?*”

“Re-unification under their rule, I suppose...” Beatrix replied, carefully peeking outside. “Alright, the coast is clear. Let’s get moving, girls. We’re too exposed here.”

**March 29th, 1820, Town Square Wall,
Alexandria.**

16:20 P.M.

“I really hope they’re okay,” Zidane thought, looking at the city from atop the Royal District’s wall. A dense mass of golems had congregated outside, and they were *all* staring at him with their unnerving yellow eyes. Unflinching. Unwavering. Like hunters, stalking their prey.

“Do you think they’ll attempt to breach the field, sir?” a female knight in plate armor asked him.

“They’re welcome to try. We could easily wreck ‘em that way,” the genome replied. “... They’re up to something, there’s no doubt about it, but *what?* What are they waiting for..?”

“It’s so quiet out there... do you think General Beatrix made it to the tower already?” the knight asked, disturbed by the machines’ predatory behavior.

“I doubt it, but I’m glad we have these tin cans’ full attention. That should make it easier for the girls to move around,” the king replied. “Madeline, there’s something that’s been bugging me for a while now...”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Could you please find out why hasn’t the Gargan Roo patrol reported in yet?” Zidane said.

“I’ve ordered them to flood the tunnel a few minutes ago, but I’ve received no response or confirmation whatsoever. If we let these things pop out of the ground behind our defenses, we’re screwed.”

“Right away, sir!” Madeline exclaimed, saluting the king and leaving in a hurry.

“Come on... we’re running out of time,” the genome muttered, sweat sliding down his temple.

**March 29th, 1820, Gargan Roo Entrance,
Castle Grounds, Alexandria.**

16:25 P.M.

Having realized how dangerous it was to have a tunnel to a hostile country leading straight into their bedroom, Garnet and Zidane had ordered the old Gargan Roo entrance sealed, and a new one had been excavated on the eastern side of the castle’s grounds, near the garden. The passageway was heavily guarded nowadays, but hope remained that one day it would become a cheap mean of transport

for people coming and going from both sides of the continent.

“*Guards! Open up!*” Captain Madeline yelled, banging on the door that led into the depths, but no one answered. She tried to force it open, but it was locked from the inside. ‘*Dammit!*’ she spat, looking around for help. “Briar, Nell, c’mere!” she shouted at two passing soldiers, waving them closer.

“What is it, ma’am?” Private Briar asked, approaching her.

“Go tell His Majesty that the Gargan Roo entrance has been..!”

A loud rumble, followed by a cacophony of inhuman screeches interrupted her. She turned around and put her ear against the door, cold sweat running down her spine.

“*What was that..?*” Nell mumbled, paralyzed by fear.

“It’s them... *they’re coming upstairs!*” Madeline exclaimed. “Nell! Give the alarm! We have a perimeter breach!”

“R-right away, ma’am!” the soldier squeaked, scrambling for the castle as if *Bahamut himself* was

coming for her.

“Briar, we need to freeze this thing shut before they reach the surface!” the captain said, backing away from the door and pointing her open palm at it.

“*You’ve got to be kidding me...*” Briar mumbled, shaping her spiritual force into the mightiest Blizzara she had ever created.

The door trembled and cracked; *the creatures were right behind it.*

“*Now!*” Madeline ordered, and the two Alexandrians unleashed their power in unison. The air itself seemed to *shatter* as their combined spells ripped all moisture from it, turning the resulting liquid into a frozen barricade.

“It’s working! *It’s working!*” Briar yelled triumphantly.

“Yeah, that should buy us some... *uh-oh...*”

The duo watched in horror as a large golem punched a hole in the door. Its absurd strength cracked the ice wall from side to side as if it was made of glass.

“*Shit, shit, shit, shit!*” Briar sputtered, her survival instinct *demanding* her to turn tail and run.

“*Hold the line!*” Madeline barked, reinforcing their makeshift barrier with her magic.

The mechanical brute moved away from the hole and a smaller android took its place. It raised a glowing, clawed finger and pointed it at the Alexandrians as if marking them for death. Large cracks and fractures appeared within the barricade as it started melting at a terrifying rate; the automaton was *dispelling it*.

“Umm... captain..?” Briar said, realizing that their heroic defense was about to end *messily*.

“*Watch out!*” Madeline screamed, pushing her comrade out of the way. With a flick of the golem’s wrist, the ice wall *exploded*, sending large chunks of it flying in every direction. Time itself seemed to slow down to a crawl for Briar as the machines started pouring out of the tunnel like a flash flood. Disoriented, she got up from the ground and faced the incoming horde. Her gaze frantically searched for Madeline amidst the chaos, but she couldn’t find her.

“*Captain...*” she mumbled, her voice drowned by the machines’ deafening gallop. Outnumbered, outflanked, she closed her eyes and accepted her fate.

BOOOOM!

An impossibly bright explosion sent her tumbling backward. She screamed in pain and confusion, the scorching light having burned itself into her retinas. Suddenly, someone lifted her up and started carrying her away from the battlefield.

“WE NEED RUN! ZIDANE DANGEROUS WHEN ANGRY!” her savior yelled. Behind them, the Tranced genome let out an inhuman howl that made Alexandria itself *tremble*.

“**UNLEASHED AT LAST!**” Zidane roared, his armor transmuted into fur and his fingers into claws. “**NOW, LET THE KILLING BEGIN!**”

The golems wasted no time and bombarded him with a devastating spell salvo. Without missing a beat, they rushed *en masse* into the resulting smoke cloud, blades bared and glowing eyes peeled.

“**YOU CALL THAT BLACK MAGIC, BISHOP?**” Zidane’s voice boomed from within the billowing darkness.

A hovering rune made of light materialized in front of the androids, and with a searing flash, it burst into a swarm of projectiles. The machines screeched as the arrow-like beams impaled them,

sending them crashing into their own ranks. Drunk with power, the genome kept firing blindly, relishing every second of it.

“I understand you now, brother...” he thought, abandoning himself to ecstasy as his spell decimated everything in front of him. His aura became blood-red as he raised his hand, intent on giving his symphony of destruction a proper finale.

“ZIDANE, NO!” Quina shouted, recognizing the ominous glow that preceded a Grand Lethal, but the genome snapped his fingers without a second thought, detonating all his magic missiles at once.

**March 29th, 1820, Radio Tower District,
Alexandria,**

16:27 P.M.

“Finally... the heart of the swarm,” Freya thought, staring at the radio tower complex from the safety of a nearby roof. She crouched and peered over the ledge at the streets below.

“What can you see, ma’am?” Sir Osbern whispered, carefully approaching her.

“... Fourteen machines guard the door to the compound. Half of them are different from the ones we’ve seen until now...” she replied.

“Different? How so?”

“They’re smaller, and there’s a winged one too,” Freya stated.

“Like the ones we saw patrolling the market district?” Sir Osbern asked, raising a gray eyebrow.

“Exactly.”

“*Dammit...* what do you suggest, ma’am?”

“Hmm... I think we should...” Freya said, but a distant howl cut her short. “*That voice! Could it be..?*” she thought, turning around just in time to witness a gigantic explosion.

KRA-KOOOOM!

Her heart skipped a beat.

“*N-no...*” she mumbled, helplessly watching one of Alexandria Castle’s towers crumble and fall,

pulverized by a magic blast so mighty that it rivaled anything Kuja did in his heyday.

“What was that?!” Sir Osbern squeaked, having nearly fallen off the roof out of sheer surprise. The entire Burmecian squad stared blankly at the fireball, each one wondering if their loved ones had gotten caught in it.

“*That light...*” Freya muttered. A sharp pain made her clutch her chest as the memory of Kuja *murdering her* at the very heart of the universe replayed in her mind again, and again, and again. “*N-no..! Not.. now!*” she stammered, looking at her trembling hands; they were glowing a blinding white.

“I’ve told you. You can’t protect anyone.”

The ground beneath her feet suddenly turned into smoldering rock. She raised her eyes and saw her own Tranced form, staring at her from atop the Hill of Despair.

“*Who are you..?*” the Burmecian asked.

“I am everything you were destined to be, but failed to become,” the entity stated. **“I am the source of your strength, power incarnate. I am the Beast.”**

Another wave of sharp, stabbing pain forced Freya to her knees. “*Nrrrrgh..!*” she grunted, finding herself unable to stand up.

“Pathetic,” her monstrous reflection sneered. **“Save us time and stay down. I’ll take over from here.”**

“... Whatever you are, I won’t endanger my comrades by cutting you loose!” the Burmecian declared, panting heavily.

The impostor glared at her for a moment and then began descending the slope, summoning an energy spear to its hand as it walked.

“You know what your problem is?” it asked. **“You’re not worthy of the Crescent legacy. You’re a liability, just like our father!”**

Freya gasped; *now she was furious.*

“How dare you speak of him like that?!” she hissed, finding in her own indignation the strength to get up and fight.

“Why shouldn’t I? Mother died because of his incompetence,” the Beast replied, savoring her frustration. **“Now, tell me, sister, how many have already perished due to your failings?”**

“That’s it! I swear to Reis I’ll kill you!” Freya barked. Blinded by rage, she sprinted uphill, intent on bashing her alter ego’s skull in. The wraith kicked her in the face instead, sending her tumbling backward. Without giving her time to even try standing up, it leaped high into the air and landed on her stomach, knocking the wind out of her.

“See? You don’t have what it takes to fight your own battles!” the doppelganger roared, pinning Freya down with its foot. **“Now do something useful for once in your life and let me replace you!”**

Having said those words, it raised its weapon and aimed for the Burmecian’s heart.

“Don’t listen to her, kiddo! You’re better than this!” Kain Crescent’s voice echoed in Freya’s mind, prompting her to open her eyes just in time to see the fiery spear approaching.

“You won’t replace anyone!” she roared, catching it with her hands *milliseconds* before it impaled her. The entity screamed in agony as the dragoon’s touch destabilized its form.

“What are you doing?! You can’t survive without me!” it shrieked, melting into a seething

mass of energy.

“*Of course I can, impostor!*” Freya retorted, clenching her teeth and absorbing it back into herself. The Beast desperately thrashed and struggled, but the dragoon’s resolve overwhelmed it, and they both lost consciousness as they fused once again into a single being.

“Lady Freya? *Lady Freya!*” a distant voice echoed in her head.

“Sir Osbern..?” she mumbled, coming back to her senses. Raw, unbridled magic swirled within her soul like a hurricane, and she realized, much to her dismay, that she could not stop all that pent-up power from manifesting.

“Lady Freya... you’re *glowing...*” the Burmecian knight stammered, taking a step back.

“Erik... **RUN!**” Freya howled as her flesh turned into burning white steel.

“Oh, gods... retreat! *Retreat!*” Sir Osbern yelled as the fiery wraith in front of him let out a blood-curling screech. The dragoons immediately jumped off the roof and dispersed, looking for cover.

Alerted to her presence, the golems protecting the radio tower bombarded Freya with such a massive spell volley that it utterly demolished the house atop which she stood.

Naturally, she couldn't care less.

Unscathed by the attack, the Burmecian took to the skies with a gigantic leap. The largest automaton spread its wings and gave chase, intent on shooting her down before she could counterattack. Sparks flew from its claws as it fired a devastating lightning spell at the dragoon, hitting her dead center.

“*Freya!*” Mikoto yelled, watching the fight unfold from the streets below.

“Dammit... she’s in trouble!” Beatrix spat, looking skyward. The sound of heavy footsteps brought her back to reality. One of her soldiers approached the last house on the north side of the block and peeked around the corner. She almost lost her head when a hail of icicle-like projectiles greeted her.

“*Shit! They saw me!*” the trooper yelled, panting heavily. “Machines, at least ten of them, my general!”

“We’re gonna get flanked!” Mikoto squeaked.

A loud war cry, followed by the sound of clashing metal, cut her short.

“*For Burmecia!*” Sir Osbern shouted, and a quartet of roaring warriors joined him. Beatrix gasped; *the Burmecians had engaged the enemy on their own.*

“They’re gonna get themselves killed!” she yelled. “Lydia, stay with Mikoto! The rest, follow me!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Blood rushing, hearts racing, the general and her four soldiers abandoned cover and charged at the golem squad to save their outnumbered comrades.

“*Phalanx, now!*” Sir Osbern ordered, jumping backward to avoid a swing aimed at his neck. Standing side by side like a living wall, the dragoons managed to keep the androids at bay, trapping them between two fronts. Finding themselves surrounded, the automatons tried to escape by climbing a nearby house with their claws, but Beatrix was having none of it.

“*Oh, no, you won’t!*” she shouted, channeling her power into *Save the Queen* and slashing in the machines’ direction. A gust of razor wind hit the

golems with tremendous force, sending them plummeting to the ground.

“They’re wide open! Show no mercy!” the dragoon leader yelled, and everyone pounced on the androids like frenzied predators. Mikoto winced at the sight of her teammates repeatedly stabbing and crushing the creatures. “*It had to be done...*” she thought, looking away.

“... Is everyone alright?” Beatrix asked, taking a short break to catch her breath.

The oldest dragoon tottered a little and collapsed on the ground as if answering her question.

“Sven! *Oh, no...*” Sir Osbern said, rushing to his friend’s side and kneeling to assess his wounds; *he had been stabbed in the gut.*

“I’m done for, Erik...” the knight said, coughing up blood. “Leave me now... there’s no... *ghk..!*”

“Please, step aside. I’ve got this,” Beatrix said, approaching the dying Burmecian. The dragoon squad glared at her with varying degrees of intensity, but the general accepted their scorn without a word. She covered the gaping wound with her hand and channeled her spiritual power into it. Glorious light

surged as her spell weaved flesh and bone back together.

“Beatrix... are you okay?” Mikoto asked.

“*Shhh!*” the paladin hissed, trying to stay focused. White magic was *extremely* draining, and she was way too old to use it on that scale. She clenched her teeth and powered through the ordeal, determined to save the knight’s life no matter the cost. “*There... done...*” she stammered, looking ready to collapse on top of the Burmecian.

“*My general, are you alright?!*” one of her soldiers asked, helping her stand up.

“Don’t worry, I’m just a bit winded... that’s all,” Beatrix replied. “He’ll live...” she said, looking at Sir Osbern through lidded eyes. The dragoon glared at her for a moment and finally let out a sigh.

“Björn, find someplace safe and stay with him. You’ve done enough today,” he said, addressing the young squire. “Nothing’s changed between us, general... but thank you for saving him. We shall stay true to our word.”

A loud impact interrupted their conversation. The winged golem had crashed into a nearby house leaving a large hole in the wall, and the buzzing of a

hundred energy spears flying their way prompted everyone to dive for cover.

“Cover your ears!” Beatrix ordered just before Freya’s volley turned the building into a pile of rubble.

“Is she nuts?! She could have killed us with that!” Sir Osbern yelled, still deafened by the barrage.

“She’s in a Trance! We must wait for it to end before approaching her!” Mikoto replied, rubbing her sore temples.

“*Impossible!* If we let her keep firing like that, she might damage the tower!” Beatrix squawked, rising to her feet. “Come on, girls! We need to do something!”

Her squad stared blankly at her, as if she had just ordered them to go kill themselves.

“*Must... remain... in control!*” Freya thought, grinding her teeth as the urge to go feral became unbearable. A distant sound brought her back to reality; a dozen winged golems were homing in on her like monstrous birds of prey. She grinned and

summoned an energy spear to her hand. “COME AT ME! ALL OF YOU!” She roared defiantly.

The grotesque angels of destruction attempted to overwhelm her with a coordinated attack, but for every hit they landed, the Burmecian killed two of them; their blades simply bounced off her armor, and they stopped trying to use magic against her once she started powering through their spells with nary a scratch.

“**Glorious, isn’t it?**” a voice in the back of her mind said as she ripped the last golem’s soul core out of its body. The machine stared at her with its glowing yellow eyes, and she shuddered a little when she glimpsed emotion in them (*relief, perhaps?*) just before it fell lifelessly to the ground.

“... *These are innocent souls, forced to fight us against their will,*” Freya thought, looking at the cursed device in her hand. “*There’s no glory in this battle, only survival...*”

“Freya! Can you hear me?” someone yelled from below. She looked down and saw Beatrix waving at her from atop a roof.

“**Since *when* are we on a first-name basis with that murderer?**” the Beast boomed, sending a wave

of hatred rippling through her mind. **“We should kill her for her impertinence!”**

“There’s no *we* either... only *me*, and *I* decide who to ally with!” Freya grunted, wincing from the effort. Staying sane was draining her strength at an alarming rate, and her Trance was so intense that it would not dissipate anytime soon.

A flicker of light in the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned her head just in time to discover its source; the golems defending the radio tower complex had fired a massive fireball salvo at the general, and it was big enough to level the entire block.

“*BEATRIX, WATCH OUT!*” she yelled, taking a nosedive to save her comrade. Her Dragon’s Crest shone brighter than the sun as she sent the contained souls to intercept the barrage, but more than a few projectiles managed to get past her technique.

“Dammit, I didn’t think this through..!” Beatrix thought, facing the incoming onslaught. Save the Queen glowed red as she imbued it with a Reflect spell, and with a flurry of slashes, she deflected the fireballs right back at her attackers, blowing them up and setting ablaze the area they were defending.

“Oh, crap...” she gasped, covering her mouth; *she had come close to destroying the compound herself.*

A loud explosion resonated across the city... only this time, it didn't come from the radio tower.

Beatrix turned around immediately.

“... What the..?” she mumbled, staring blankly at the detonation's source. Due to her position at the time, she had mistaken Zidane's rampage for a skirmish near the royal district, but now that she had a clear line of sight to the castle, she realized that it was missing a rather big chunk.

KLANG!

“Huh?!” the general uttered, taken by surprise. She turned around and saw Freya standing behind her; she had blocked a projectile meant for her with a swing of her spear.

“Focus, Beatrix! This isn't over yet!” the Burmecian exclaimed, scanning the flames for signs of their attacker.

“Thanks, Freya...” the paladin said, picking up the bladed disc that the dragoon had deflected. *“What is this thing..?”*

“A *chakram*...” the dragoon replied. **“I haven’t seen one since...”**

An armored figure emerged from the fire, walking through it as if it was nothing. Freya held her breath; *there was something eerily familiar about the way it moved.*

“Machine?” Beatrix asked, trying to get a better look at their opponent.

“Not sure... but I have an idea...” the Burmecian answered, lowering her weapon. **“Identify yourself, *monk*!”** she shouted, her Trance amplifying her voice a hundred times.

“Do I really need to, rat?” the stranger boomed, deploying claw-like blades from his gauntlets and assuming a hunched, almost primal stance.

“That voice... *I know that voice!*” Beatrix said, readying Save the Queen.

“... *Amarant*?” Freya stammered, almost choking on the name.

Author’s note:

Hi, everybody! It's been a while! I wanted to thank you all for reading my work. A special mention for **Josh1013** is in order, as he's been generously backing up this project for a good while now. He's writing an awesome fic called "**Final Fantasy 9: Underworld Chaos**" in which Gaia goes *literally* to hell, haha! You should really go check it out if you haven't already; it's a highly engaging story with lots of cool details everywhere!

See you on the next chapter!

23. Salvation

Warning:

Graphic violence ahead

**March 29th, 1820, Radio Tower District,
Alexandria,**

16:39 P.M.

“... Amarant,” Freya stammered, almost choking on the name.

The bounty hunter stared at her through his glowing red visor. His armor completely obscured his features, but his voice was unmistakable.

“I get it now...” Beatrix grunted, tightening her grip on Save the Queen. “He sold Bishop all the intel she needed to bypass our defenses!”

“You’re wrong! He’d never do that!” the dragoon replied. **“He must be under some form of**

mind control!”

“Whatever the reason, he stands between us and the only way to save the kingdom,” the general said.

A loud rumble echoed across the city as another section of Alexandria Castle crumbled into dust. Beatrix gasped and shot a bewildered look at Freya, who was paralyzed by indecision.

“I’m sorry, Freya...” she said, rushing past her. With feline agility, she jumped off the roof onto a nearby lamppost and slid down alongside it.

“*Nice trick, hag...*” Amarant sneered.

“*Bounty hunter!*” Beatrix yelled, pointing her sword at him. “Surrender the tower peacefully and we shall consider our past alliance while deciding your punishment!”

The monk let out a wry chuckle.

“You’re not the smartest negotiator, aren’t you?” he answered, straightening his posture and folding his arms.

“No, but I’m the deadliest one, Coral,” Beatrix retorted, infusing Save the Queen with energy until it glowed. “This is your last chance. Surrender now or die!”

“Sharp tongue, for a dead woman,” the burly warrior replied, waving her closer. “Let’s see if you can live up to your boasting!”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” the general exclaimed, brandishing her sword. “*Attack!*”

With Beatrix leading the charge, her unit abandoned cover and rushed toward Amarant.

“Heh, *Idiots.*” the bounty hunter muttered under his breath. He then pointed his finger at the incoming Alexandrians. “*Give ’em hell, boys!*” he roared.

Ten magitek armor-clad Treno soldiers jumped through the fire wall at once and unloaded a fusillade of ice stakes on Beatrix’s team. The Alexandrians reacted forming a shield wall and standing their ground.

“*Not gonna work!*” the paladin exclaimed as the projectiles hit an invisible wall and shattered; *her knights had enchanted their gear with Shell spells beforehand.*

“*Keep firing!*” the bounty hunter ordered with a cruel smirk. He drew several chakrams from his back-mounted holster and aimed for his enemies’ legs.

“Father Berlioz, give us strength!” Sir Osbern yelled as his dragoons entered the fight raining spears from above, forcing Amarant’s team to cease fire and disperse.

“*Great, more flying squirrels...*” the armored giant thought, dive rolling out of the way. He counterattacked by throwing his discs at the knight, but something that looked like a falling star intercepted them at the last second.

“***Amarant!***” the ‘comet’ howled, hurtling toward the bounty hunter.

“Oh? Look who’s here!” he said, bracing for impact.

WHAM!

“*Ooof..!*” he uttered as Freya slammed into him, sending them both tumbling through the flames and into the radio tower complex’s inner patio.

“***What’s wrong with you?!***” she shrieked as she rose to her feet. Tackling him had felt to her like headbutting a rock, and the resulting dizziness warned her about the finitude of her Trance.

“*Heh...* about damn time,” the bounty hunter said, standing up with alarming ease. “You look

radiant today.”

“Have you lost your mind, brute?!” Freya squawked, balling up her fists. ***“Why are you doing this?! I thought we were friends!”***

She stared at his strange armor, looking for clues on what had happened to him. It covered his whole body and looked nothing like Alexandrian or Burmecian military garb. Its most unsettling piece was the helmet, whose faceplate lacked any features beyond its thin red visor. Hadn't his voice been so distinctive, she would have mistaken him for another of Bishop's machines.

“Friends? What on Gaia gave you that impression?” he retorted, grinding his claws against each other. “Now come. It's past time we finally settle our score!”

With a quick flick of his wrist, the bounty hunter hurled three chakrams at Freya and charged at her immediately after. She barely had time to deflect the rings before he got into striking range, claws ready to tear her apart.

“So fast..!” she thought, dodging his uppercut by the skin of her teeth.

“Gotcha!” he said, sweeping her legs with a spinning kick. As she fell sideways, he pointed his palm at her torso and sent her tumbling with an energy blast.

“Ngh! You bastard..!” Freya groaned, getting back up. She heard a clicking sound and several metallic spheres sprang upward from beneath the dirt.

“Surprise!” the bounty hunter exclaimed with a savage grin.

The dragoon gasped and tried to leap away as the orbs exploded. The resulting shockwave hit her through her armor, making her flesh *ripple*.

“Uwaaargh!” she screamed, landing face first on the ground. Hadn’t her Trance shielded her, she would have been instantly killed.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t move from that spot,” the mercenary warned her, tapping his visor. “This place is a minefield, and only I can see where the bombs are.”

“I can’t believe this is happening...” Freya replied, getting up carefully. **“What lies has Bishop fed you to make you hate us this much?”**

“Lies? You think I’m some sort of victim, don’t you?” the mercenary retorted, drawing yet another set of chakrams. “I went to her of my accord, to get back what you took away from me.”

“Huh..? And what is that, if I may ask?”

“*Purpose!*” he roared, throwing his discs at her with enough power behind them to cut a tree in half.

Freya summoned one last energy spear and prepared to block the barrage. As the weapon materialized in her hands, her soul armor evaporated and fatigue started setting in; *she was knee-deep in trouble, and she knew it.*

WHOOSH!

The dragoon gasped as a powerful gust of wind blew the chakrams away. She looked aside and saw Beatrix, sword in hand and covered in blood, standing at the gate with the fiercest glare one could imagine. She was panting heavily and her drooping shoulders made her exhaustion even more apparent, but only death would stop her by that point.

“Prepare to die, traitor!” she shouted, drawing strength from her own rage to keep fighting.

“Beatrix, no!” the Burmecian yelled. *“The floor is littered with..!”*

STAB!

“Freya!” Beatrix yelled, covering her mouth in horror.

The Burmecian opened her eyes wide. *“Urk..!”* she uttered, coughing up blood. The soul spear in her hand lost its shape and dissolved into mist.

“... See? Attachment makes you weak,” Amarant whispered in her ear and then pulled his blades out with a swift motion.

SQUELCH!

“Ack..!” Freya croaked as the claws exited her body, leaving two wide holes in her plackart. Wounded, exhausted and betrayed, she lost her balance and fell to the ground, a freezing cold sensation burning her from the inside. *“I knew it...”* she muttered. *“You’re... not him...”*

“DIE!” Beatrix roared, taking the bounty hunter off guard with a reckless lunge. He leaped away to dodge her attack, but she managed to hit him, destroying part of his faceplate and splashing red on the dirt.

“Are you insane, hag?!” he howled, covering his bloodied face with his hand. *“You almost blew us all up by running like that!”*

“Freya! Freya, can you hear me?!” the general shouted, standing between her fallen comrade and the mercenary with her sword ready.

“Careful... there are landmines everywhere...” the Burmecian replied, feebly rolling onto her side.

“Got it. Stay with me, I’ll protect you!” Beatrix said, staring Amarant down.

“Rrrgh! I can’t believe you ruined my eye, you bitch!” the mercenary howled, drawing a small device from his belt pouch.

“You won’t be missing it where I’m sending you!” the general retorted, charging Save the Queen with the last of her spiritual power.

“Bluff as much as you want, you’ve already lost!” the giant exclaimed. “Just look at the horizon; the entire Treno fleet is at the gates of the city!”

The paladin glanced quickly at the southern sky and did a double take when what she had mistaken for a storm cloud turned out to be a dense swarm of airships.

“They’ll never get past our border patrol!” she shot back.

“Are you sure about that?” the bounty hunter said. “We’ve jammed your entire *comms network*; it must be fun fighting without it!”

“*I’ve had enough of you!*” Sir Osbern yelled, perched atop the compound’s perimeter wall. He had his fist pointed at Amarant and the Dragon’s Crest on his shoulder shone brightly. “Surrender now or perish, coward!”

“Would you look at that! A *real* dragonslayer!” the mercenary sneered. “Tell me, Sir Nobody of Burmecia, how many souls do you have in there? One, two?”

“Why don’t you look around, scumbag?” the knight retorted. “Even if I had just one, you still wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“*Clever little rodents...*” the giant muttered, noticing the rest of the Burmecians. They had discreetly climbed the facility’s walls while he was distracted and were ready to fire their spells at him. He let out a wry chuckle and lowered his right hand, uncovering his (*her?*) bloodied face.

“No way...” Beatrix mumbled, the mercenary’s true identity finally dawning on her. “You’re that woman... the one who always followed him around!”

“*Lani,*” Freya muttered, staring in horror at her exposed neural implants; *her helmet was wired to her head.*

“What are you rambling about?! I’m the *Flaming Amarant!*” Lani shouted, raising the device on her left hand so everyone could see it. “And *this* is the detonator of the bombs inside the main control building! Move a single finger, motherfuckers, and I swear I’m gonna blow this place up, hostages included!”

“You can’t be serious!” Beatrix exclaimed.

“*Lani, listen to me..!*” Freya said, stopping to wince as speaking worsened the pain. “*The real Amarant... would never take hostages!*”

“*What makes you think you know me that well?!*” the bounty hunter retorted.

“*Remember... Madain Sari...*” the dragoon pressed on.

“Madain Sari...” Lani mumbled as a suppressed memory stirred deep within her mind. “Something happened there... something... something important! *Rrgh..! My head! It hurts! It hurts so much!*”

A hard choice presented itself to Beatrix. Cutting down a mind-controlled innocent was completely against her principles, but if she didn’t seize the opportunity to end their standoff, Freya would bleed to death and Alexandria would be destroyed. “*Sorry girl...*” she thought, angling her sword to execute a Seiken technique.

“Please..! Make it stop! Aaaarghhh!” the cyberized mercenary screamed, grabbing her head in agony. Suddenly, she stopped moving like an unwound toy. Her jaw slackened and her gaze lost focus. “... *I’m... the Flaming Amarant...*” she stammered, raising the detonator once again. “I’m the Flaming Amarant... and *this... is my purpose...*”

“Now!” Beatrix exclaimed. With a swing of her sword, she created a huge wind blade and launched it at Lani. Everyone held their breath as the razor gale crossed the yard, leaving a crevasse on its wake. The bounty hunter came to her senses just in

time to jump out of its way, but a powerful force ripped the device out of her hand as she leaped.

“W-what?!” Lani blurted out, staring at her empty palm in disbelief. She raised her eyes and witnessed the detonator *float* all the way to the compound’s front gate, where Mikoto was waiting for it.

“That was way too close...” the genome sighed, levitating the gizmo toward herself with the power of her mind. She had her amplifier mask on and a bright aura wreathed her like a halo.

“Psychokinesis...? But when..?” Freya wondered, recognizing Garland’s signature technique. A growing numbness disrupted her train of thought and she felt a short-lived urge to laugh. “*Mother Reis... please... help me in this time of need...*” she prayed as she lost consciousness.

“Who the hell are you?!” Lani shrieked. Her helmet kept mimicking Amarant’s voice, making her breakdown all the more jarring.

“It’s over, Lani,” Beatrix intervened, lowering her blade. “Surrender peacefully, and I promise we will do you no harm.”

The bounty hunter closed her eyes, furious beyond measure. Blood dripped from her wound and onto the ground, staining her boots.

“For the last time...” she snarled, pulling out a small, round canister. “My name. Is. *Amarant!*”

As the general raised Save the Queen once again, Lani threw the orb on the ground, creating a dense smoke screen. Sir Osbern and his dragoons blasted the area with their spells, detonating most of the landmines in the process, but the mercenary had already made her getaway by then.

“We did it... she’s gone...” Beatrix said, sheathing her sword and kneeling to check Freya’s wounds. “Oh, gods... Freya, can you hear me?”

She didn’t answer.

“Freya..?”

...

“The betrayer dies at another traitor’s hands... a fitting end.”

Freya woke up.

“Father Berlioz! Is that you..?” she said, recognizing the god’s voice. The pain was gone, so she sat up and looked around her; she was in the middle (if that was even possible) of a boundless, pitch-black void.

“Father, she says...” Berlioz boomed, the sound of his approaching footsteps echoing across the abyss. ***“Save your flattery, vermin; we both know how little you respect my authority.”***

Freya didn’t know how to react to that.

“Is this it? Am I done for?” she asked, unsettled by the infinite darkness.

“Not yet, but I see you’ve noticed the beautiful scenery. Less is more, don’t you think?” the deity replied with a cruel smile. His voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. ***“This is what’s reserved for the weak and the heathen alike; perfect and absolute nothingness.”***

“Wait... is my father here?”

“Who knows? Who cares? And even if he was, good luck finding him, though...”

Equal parts angry and terrified, Freya took a deep breath and decided to confront him.

“Why show me this? What do you want from me?” she asked in the firmest tone she could muster. Berlioz chuckled, amused by her defiance.

“What do I want? Oh, little mouse, those bombs must have scrambled your brains!” he said. ***“In case you forgot, we had a deal; you would serve me as my Spear and I’d grant you the power to save Burmecia in return. Does that ring a bell?”***

“Yes, I know that,” the dragoon replied.

“THEN WHY DO YOU KEEP BEHAVING AS A REIS CULTIST?!” the god of war *roared*. Massive lightning bolts pierced the darkness as Freya glimpsed a pair of fiery eyes, glaring at her from within a gigantic vortex in the ‘sky’.

“With all due respect, Allfather, I’ve only used your power to oppose our common foe, Ulrich,” she retorted, thinking on her feet. “I fail to see how asking Reis for help could constitute treason!”

Berlioz let out a big, sardonic laugh.

“Do you even know how old I am?” he asked contemptuously. ***“I’ve been around since the dawn***

of life, child, so I find it quite offensive when a puny grub like you believes itself capable of outsmarting me!”

“I wasn’t trying to..!”

“ENOUGH!” the deity thundered, setting the void ablaze with lightning. ***“I’m not here to negotiate! I’ve come to claim your Dragon’s Crest!”***

“*Huh?!*” the Burmecian uttered as the vortex in the sky spun faster and faster. The mark on her shoulder activated on her own and Freya felt that a piece of herself was being pulled into the maelstrom. “*No, stop it! You’re hurting them!*” she yelled, sensing the dragon souls’ pain as they were forcibly removed from her and consumed by Berlioz.

“They no longer belong to you, pagan,” the Allfather boomed. ***“I hereby strip you of your knighthood and declare our contract void!”***

“Wait! What about Burmecia?!” the dragoon asked as her Dragon’s Crest evaporated, erased by divine power.

“I shall choose a more loyal candidate,” Berlioz replied. ***“May you wander forever this infinite nothingness.”***

“No! Wait! *Wait!*” Freya yelled as the soul cyclone dissipated, leaving her alone in the darkness.

“Come on, Freya, wake up!” Beatrix said, struggling to sustain her healing spell.

“She’s not breathing... why isn’t she breathing..?” Mikoto mumbled. Her eyes started welling up.

“Freya, *please*, wake up!” the general pleaded as her feeble Curaga fizzled out. “Dammit! *Dammit!*”

Sir Osbern took his helmet off as a sign of respect.

“My general, more machines are coming our way...” one of the Alexandrian soldiers said. “They’ll reach the complex soon.”

Beatrix closed her eyes and sorted out her thoughts for a moment. “Lydia...” she finally said.

“Yes, ma’am?” the soldier replied.

“You and Sir Osbern are in charge now,” the paladin stated, handing her a crumpled plan of the

facility. “Lead Mikoto to the control room and put an end to this nightmare.”

“W-what?” Lydia blurted out. “But..!”

“I’ve spent all my power on that last Curaga. I can’t even stand up,” Beatrix said, interrupting her. “In my state, I’d only become a liability for you, and we need to act fast if we want to save the kingdom.”

Lydia bit back a sob.

“Yes, ma’am...” she stammered, saluting her. The three other soldiers repeated the gesture, trying not to cry.

“Mikoto,” Beatrix said, offering the genome a dignified smile. “Zidane was wrong; you’re as strong as you’re wise.”

The genome felt a lump in her throat.

“Thank you...” she muttered, nodding her head.

“Now go teach these bastards not to mess with you,” the paladin said. “Don’t worry about Crescent, We’ll take care of her.”

“O-okay...” Mikoto stammered, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Good luck, Bea...”

“This way, ma’am, watch your step,” Lydia said, leading the scientist and the rest of her unit through the minefield.

Sir Osbern stared at Beatrix with an unreadable expression.

“You’re actually gonna do it, aren’t you?” he asked, resting his battered spear on his shoulder. “... *Torching* your soul.”

“I see no other way to save her,” the general replied.

“Admirable...” the dragoon commented, putting his helmet back on. “Maybe there’s more to you than meets the eye.”

“Thank you, Sir Osbern,” Beatrix replied.

“Brothers, listen to me!” the grizzled knight shouted, addressing his tired but determined comrades. “The difference between our families living or dying lies in how much time we can buy! Barricade that gate and steel yourselves for combat! We’ll live to tell our grandsons how we won this war!”

The surviving rat-men let out a fierce war cry and began the preparations for their last stand.

“Freya... I once took everything from you, and yet you saved my life at the cost of yours,” Beatrix muttered, turning her own soul into fuel for her final spell. *“Now, more than ever, I wish we had met under different circumstances. Goodbye, dear friend... it’s been an honor.”*

The paladin placed her hands on Freya’s wounds and unleashed the full power of her white magic. As the miracle transmuted her essence into flesh and blood, a wave of unimaginable pain hit her, but she gritted her teeth and pressed on. Her memories started fading away, consumed by the enchantment, so she desperately held onto the happiest ones to draw strength from them.

“Come on... breathe...” she whispered, straddling the line between life and death. She had surpassed all her physical limits by then and only her sheer willpower kept her going. *“Come on, Freya, breathe!”*

Freya suddenly gasped for air; she was still unconscious, but the hemorrhage had largely subsided.

“Yes! Yes!” Beatrix exclaimed triumphantly. *“Once more, with feeling!”*

After drawing another sharp breath, the Burmecian's respiration steadied to a nice, regular rhythm.

“Welcome back...” Beatrix croaked, smiling as she collapsed next to her. The warm breeze on her skin started lulling her to sleep but she blinked a few times, afraid of never waking up again. “*My love...*” she muttered, evoking her husband as she succumbed to exhaustion. “*I’m finally... free...*”

March 29th, 1820, Radio Tower Control Facility, Alexandria,

16:55 P.M.

“Strange... there seems to be no one home...” Lydia whispered, sword in hand. “Be careful, though, there might be more of them lying in ambush.”

“Not only that,” Mikoto added. “Judging by the minefield outside, we’re probably dealing with some kind of demolitions expert, so watch out for booby traps.”

The team walked quietly down a series of dark corridors until they found a metal staircase.

“The control room should be on the first floor,” Lydia said. “Come on, we’re...”

“*Wait! Look!*” Mikoto hissed, pointing at the soldier’s raised foot. “You’re about to step on something!”

“*Tripwire...*” Lydia muttered, realizing that she had been *inches* away from setting off a trap. She followed the almost invisible thread to its source and gasped in horror when she discovered a rather impressive bomb cluster hidden under the stair. “*Holy shit...*” she muttered.

“Let me see,” Mikoto said. “Wow, they *really* wanted us dead... just look at how many strings come out of these things, it’s insane...”

“What now?” one of the soldiers asked.

“Hmm... does anyone here know ice magic?” the scientist asked. “We could cool them to disable their electronic components.”

“Just cool ’em you say?” the third trooper chimed in, raising a blue-glowing hand. “What about *flash-freezing* ’em?”

“Yes! Encasing them in a solid block would also neutralize the tripwire mechanism! *An ice solution*, indeed!” Mikoto exclaimed.

“*Icy* what you did there,” the Alexandrian quipped, pointing her open palm at the explosives. “Step back, girls, I’ve got this.”

Cold magic surged from the soldier’s hand, forming a crystalline prison around the bombs. With a flick of her wrist, a thin layer of frost also appeared on the wires, making them easier to spot in the dark.

“Great job, Christine!” Lydia said, “Let’s go, team, we have no time to lose!”

“*Hello..? Is anyone there?*” a little voice echoed across the hallway.

“Was that a *child?*” Mikoto muttered, taken by surprise.

“One of the hostages, perhaps?” Christine suggested, glancing at Lydia.

“Okay, Ratchel, you and Chris go check that out. Stay sharp, more of these things are to be expected,” the squad leader ordered, pointing at the frozen bombs. “Helga, stay with us, we’ll secure the main

control room and stop the radio jamming. Understood?”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“All right, let’s do this,” Lydia said.

17:00 P.M.

“This is the room we’re looking for...” Mikoto said, reading the map. “Should we just open the door and enter?”

“*Nuh-uh*, it’s surely rigged to kill us somehow,” Lydia replied. “Step back, I’ll blast it with a spell.”

“Wait, I have a better idea!” the genome said, putting on her amplifier mask. She closed her eyes and focused on the door’s structure, scanning it with her mind. “You were right, there’s a bomb tied to the doorknob...”

“How do you do that?” the squad leader asked. “I had never seen magic like yours before.”

“That’s because I am no mage,” Mikoto explained as she telekinetically disarmed the trap. “*I’m a psychic*. My power stems from my brain instead of my soul.”

“Well, that’s a first,” Lydia commented.

“There, I’ve untied the trigger cord. It should be safe to enter now,” the scientist stated.

“Lady Mikoto... could you please open the door with your mind? Just to be sure...” Helga asked.

“Yeah, good idea,” the genome replied, moving away from the entrance. “All right, stay back... three, two, one...”

Helga and Lydia covered their ears as Mikoto opened the door remotely. Very carefully, the team entered the room and headed straight for the hijacked radio station.

“Bingo! This must be the pirating device we’re looking for!” Mikoto exclaimed, pointing at an obsolete, Terran-style computer hooked to the transmitter.

“Can you shut it down?” Lydia asked, checking the room for traps.

“Yeah, I’ll replace it with my own computer in a... *uh-oh*,” the genome said, noticing a rather imposing demolition charge connected to the machine via colored wires. “Uh... girls? *I think we have a problem...*”

“Well, you’ll have to solve it quick, because the border patrol is about to engage the Treno fleet and they look uncoordinated as hell...” Lydia replied, looking out the window.

“I’d like to, but the computer is password-locked *and* it’s wired to *yet another freaking bomb!*” Mikoto shot back.

“*What the fuck is wrong with these people?! How do they even use their own stuff?!*” Helga yelled in frustration.

“Can’t you do that psychic *mumbo-jumbo* to dismantle it?!” Lydia asked, unable to take her eyes out of the airship battle. “Oh, shit! the *H.M.S. Prima Vista* just took a direct hit!”

“*Mumbo-jumbo... wait, that’s it!*” Mikoto exclaimed. “Helga! Cast Blizzara on the bomb!”

The trooper obeyed right away, encasing the explosive in a block of ice.

“Come on girls! They’re tearing us a new one out there!” Lydia shouted.

“*Shut up and get out! I need to concentrate!*” the genome exploded. The two soldiers quietly scuttled back to the hallway as Mikoto psychokinetically disconnected the computer from the transmitter. A throbbing headache caused by overusing her powers started blurring her sight, but she clenched her teeth and pressed on. “*Almost... there..!*” she muttered, and with a most satisfying **click**, the device unplugged itself from the radio station without triggering the frozen bomb.

“Yes! Yes, *godsdammit!*” Helga cheered as the Alexandrian comms network was finally purged of the jamming signal.

“Wonderful work, Mikoto! That should give our fleet the boost it needs!” Lydia exclaimed.

The entire facility *trembled* for a brief moment.

“What was that?!” Mikoto said, pulling her portable computer out of her backpack and plugging it to the transmitter.

“It’s the Burmecians! They’re summoning some kind of *dragon ghosts* to defend the complex!” Helga replied, looking out the window.

“Burmecians don’t use the Dragon’s Crest unless cornered. I need to shut down those androids fast!” the genome thought as her fingers danced furiously across the keyboard.

“Shit, the machines are about to get in!” Lydia said, drawing her sword. “Helga, stay with Mikoto. I’ll go help fight them off!”

“Yes ma’am!” the trooper replied.

As Mikoto worked frantically on her computer, Helga witnessed the brazen army destroy the barricaded front gate and pool into the patio like a tsunami. Fortunately, the minefield delayed them long enough to let the dragoons retreat into the building, carrying Beatrix and Freya with them.

“Oh gods, they’re banging on the front door!” Helga shouted.

“Almost done!” Mikoto replied.

“They’re climbing the walls!”

“Almost done!”

“*Mikoto!*” Helga screamed as the automatons smashed the windows and started crawling into the control room.

“*Done!*” the genome yelled, punching the ‘Enter’ key.

“ENCODING SEQUENCE,” the computer’s AI stated.

“*Kal! Do something!*” Mikoto shrieked as a golem grabbed her by the neck and prepared to gut her with its wrist-mounted blade.

“TRANSMITTING,” Kal said, using the radio tower to broadcast the deactivation code to all of Alexandria. The lights on the automaton’s ‘eyes’ went dark and its grip slackened, letting Mikoto fall to the floor. She didn’t stop screaming in terror until she realized that the rest of the androids had also ceased functioning.

“... I-is it over..?” Helga stammered, poking one of them with the tip of her sword. *It didn’t react.*

“I... I think so...” the scientist mumbled, trembling like a Flan. “... I’m gonna need a fresh pair of pants.”

Helga looked out the smashed window and uttered a long, triumphant holler; *they had finally defeated the golem army.*

Author's note:

Yes, I know this is a rather bitter chapter. I've based Freya's resuscitation scene on what the game taught me about the differences between gameplay and story during Brahne's death scene. If Garnet and Eiko couldn't save her while being together and at full strength, then white magic must be far less powerful and cost-effective than it looks like during the battles. White Draw wasn't an option either, as the skill is taught to Freya by a Cleyran priest (emerald) and these are Berlioz-aligned Burmecians (not to mention that he's actively blocking Reis' magic out of spite) and Six Dragons is so dangerous to use that it could have crippled the defenders long before the machines got to them. Phoenix Downs and Ethers simply don't make sense to me from a series-wide lore standpoint (as demonstrated by Galuf's death scene during FFV), and even if they did, I highly doubt Beatrix would have been carrying enough of them to cast a spell that Garnet and Eiko combined couldn't do while at full MP (that is assuming that they didn't let Brahne die on purpose).

Stay tuned for the conclusion of the Battle of Alexandria!

24. Alone in the Dark

**March 29th, 1820, Lebender Forest, Gunitas
Basin, Alexandria.**

17:45

“This isn’t good...” Steiner said, staring at the forest from inside the cave. “There are too many of them...”

“What are they waiting for?” Eiko whispered, unsettled by the creatures’ insectoid traits. They had been watching their hideout for a while now, and their numbers just wouldn’t stop growing.

“They’re waiting for an attack order,” the Pluto knight replied. “They’re drones, controlled by a Plant Brain. They won’t stop hunting us until we leave their master’s domain.”

“Are you serious? A *real* Plant Brain?” Major Dionne asked, strengthening her grip on her war hammer. “Didn’t they go extinct when Evil Forest was petrified?”

“*Drat...* it’s starting to rain. This is going to get rough.” Steiner commented, staring at the overcast sky. Thunder echoed across the woods as the weather quickly deteriorated to a downpour. The rain was so intense that it severely restricted visibility, concealing the creatures’ movements. Loud screeching could be heard coming from every direction, punctuated by the occasional lightning strike; it was as if *the forest itself* was coming for them.

“Shit... can’t see ’em!” Eiko exclaimed, squinting futilely. “What are we supposed to do now?!”

“Can’t Phoenix carry us away?” Steiner asked. “Because I see no way outta here other than up!”

“Oh, yeah! Let’s hitch a ride on a fucking *fireball*! How could that possibly go wrong?!” the summoner hissed.

A monstrous roar suddenly drowned their discussion. It was a dissonant, almost alien sound, and it filled the survivors with dread.

“*What. The hell. Was that..?*” Eiko muttered, clutching her mystical flute.

“It’s the attack order!” Steiner yelled as the horde of Plant Spiders began charging at the cavern.

“We must retreat, now!” Major Dionne exclaimed, yanking Eiko by the arm.

“No need to tell us twice!” the soldiers exclaimed in unison, fleeing back into the cave as if Odin himself was chasing them.

“Whoa! Wait, Dionne! Let go!” the summoner shrieked as the Master-at-arms dragged her away from the entrance. Much to her horror, the Pluto Knight had decided to stand his ground instead of following them. *“Steiner! What are you doing?! C’mere!”* she yelled.

“If they get into the cave, we’re toast!” Steiner shouted, channeling his spiritual power into the Ragnarok. *“Go! I’ll catch up with you in a moment!”*

“What? You’re gonna bring the whole place down on our heads!” Eiko squawked as her team turned left at a bifurcation. *“Dionne, for fuck’s sake, leggo or I’ll..!”*

BOOOM!

A tremendous explosion reverberated across the tunnel, followed by a deafening rumble and then complete silence.

“*Steineeer!*” the summoner screamed, but only the echo answered her call.

Major Dionne stopped dead on her tracks. She didn’t let go of the princess out of fear of another cave-in, but she couldn’t bring herself to leave the knight behind either.

“*What have we done..?*” Eiko mumbled, suddenly devoid of strength. She seemed ready to fall on her knees. “We’ve abandoned him... that *jerk..!* How dare he..?”

“... Die on you?” Steiner asked, appearing out of nowhere with a smug grin.

“W-wha..?! W-where..?” the summoner stuttered, blinking stupidly at the apparition.

“This cave is actually part of a larger system,” he explained. “I just took another route to avoid getting flattened.”

“Huh..?! *YOU BASTARD! How dare you scare me like that?! Are you insane?!*” the summoner yelled at the top of her lungs, pounding on Steiner’s

armor until she got tired and then retired to a corner, cradling her sore fist. “Anyway... how are we supposed to get outta this shithole now?”

“*Manners!*” the demi-hippo mouthed at her, a little scandalized by her *unprincesslike* behavior.

“Come on, I wouldn’t have sealed the front entrance if I didn’t have a backup plan,” the knight retorted.

“*Front* entrance?” Eiko said, arching an eyebrow. “There’s another one?”

Steiner flashed a proud smile and held out his torch as steadily as possible. “What do you see?” he asked, gesturing at the flame.

“Steiner, where is this going?”

“No way...” the oldest Lindblumese soldier said, staring at the fire with a big grin on his face. “Lord Steiner, you’re a genius!”

Eiko craned a flabbergasted look at him, surprised by hearing ‘Steiner’ and ‘genius’ in the same sentence.

“Mind explaining, Vega?” the master-at-arms said, cocking her head.

“The flame flickers! See?” the soldier piped up. “It’s very subtle, but it’s definitely pointing in a direction!”

“A *draft*... that can only mean one thing!” Dionne exclaimed.

“Um... actually, it can mean more than one thing,” Vega added. “An underground river, for example...”

“So... we’re stuck in an unexplored, pitch-dark maze with a dying friend, and our only hope to ever get out is venturing even deeper without tools or supplies of any kind...” Eiko stated in a deadpan tone.

Everybody stared blankly at her.

“... Sounds about right,” she said, shrugging nonchalantly. “Come on, let’s fetch Garnet.”

“Um... are you sure that this won’t worsen Her Majesty’s condition, Eiko? Because it looks awfully uncomfortable to me.”

“Would you prefer to break her spine instead?”

“Um... n-no...”

“Then shut up and keep her back as straight as possible, *geez!*”

Steiner grumbled a rather long tirade in response. He had begrudgingly accepted to carry Garnet across his shoulders at Eiko’s request, even if he felt that the whole ordeal was *way* too undignified for a queen. The youngest summoner periodically asked the group to stop, checked on her friend for signs of bleeding and applied white magic to keep her alive.

“*Ewww...* what’s that smell?” the youngest trooper squawked after the group turned left at a junction.

“Wasn’t me, I swear,” Vega quipped, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

“Rotting flesh...” Major Dionne stated, drawing her weapon. “That can’t be a good sign.”

Steiner sniffed the putrid air a few times; for reasons he could not yet understand, it stirred something in the back of his mind, *a memory from the Mist War*.

“Wait... I know this stench,” he said, taking a few more whiffs. He glimpsed a creature scuttling

near his right foot and stomped on it reflexively. Eiko noticed his reaction and turned around to see what was going on.

“You okay?” she asked, cocking her head a little.

“I’m better now, thank you,” he answered, lifting his armored foot to reveal a dead Crawler larva... or at least what was left of it.

“Man, that’s gross as hell...” Eiko commented, crouching to take a better look at the sticky mess. “What kind of bug is this?”

“It’s a baby Crawler. Very dangerous when in numbers,” the knight stated. “There must be a nest ahead, that would explain the stench.”

“Wait, this is a *baby*?!” the summoner squawked, pointing at the goop puddle. “How big can these things get?!”

“*Huge*,” Steiner replied. “An adult can block this tunnel all by itself. Oh! And they can pull out their own stomachs and use them like clu—”

“*Okay, okay, okay*, I get the idea!” the princess exclaimed, pale as a ghost. “I think I’m gonna throw up...”

“Seems like we’re out of luck today,” Major Dionne commented, folding her arms. “What now? I assume that charging straight into that nest amounts to suicide.”

“Well, I happen to have a friend who dislikes bugs as much as I do,” Eiko said, drawing her mystical instrument. She murmured a prayer and then played a melody on her flute. A shimmering whirlwind heralded Fenrir’s arrival.

“What now?” the Eidolon boomed as his physical form emerged from the aether.

“Are you in the mood to kick some ass?” the summoner asked him via telepathic link.

“Always,” the wolf answered, flashing a murderous grin.

With Fenrir leading the march, the survivors continued their advance through the winding labyrinth until they found the entrance to a vast natural chamber. An acrid smell came from inside, marking the location of the Crawler colony.

“It’s worse than I expected...” Steiner whispered, carefully peering into the hive. Dozens of gigantic

arthropods twitched and scuttled in the dark, and a particularly large one guarded a fresh batch of eggs, surrounded by a writhing ocean of larvae.

“*Oh gods... my throat is burning..!*” Pip, the youngest Lindblumese soldier hissed, futilely covering his mouth.

“***Care to trade noses, human?***” Fenrir snarked, and Eiko chuckled at his retort. “***All right, what’s the plan? Should I charge in and blast them with a wind spell?***”

“*Exactly. Be careful, though; we don’t want to bring the ceiling down on us!*” the summoner said.

“***I’ll do my best...***” the Eidolon replied before barging into the nest, fangs bared.

“That’s not a yes!” Eiko yelled.

“***That’s not a no, either!***” Fenrir retorted, his body transmuted into the very essence of destruction. “***Have at ye, bitches!***”

Searing light flooded the cavern as the Eidolon turned into a gigantic tornado. The monsters screeched and flailed helplessly as they were sucked into the cyclone and ground into mincemeat by the roaring winds.

“It’s a worm-nado! *Woo-hooo!*” Vega cheered, pumping his fist into the air.

“More like a stink-nado! *Urk..!*” Pip uttered, struggling not to lose his lunch.

“This isn’t over yet! Look!” Steiner shouted, pointing at the giant Crawler; it had anchored itself to the floor to protect its brood, and despite the grievous wounds that Fenrir had inflicted on it, the mastodon adamantly refused to die.

“Uh, g-guys..?” Eiko stammered, sweating profusely. “I-I can’t keep this up much longer!”

Steiner and Dionne exchanged glances and nodded in agreement.

“Save your strength, ma’am! We’ll finish the job!” the demi-hippo exclaimed.

“W-we?!” Mark, the third soldier, squeaked.

“Yes, private! *We!*” Dionne barked back.

Aided by the Lindblumese soldiers, Steiner lowered Garnet to the ground as delicately as he could. The master-at-arms handed him the Ragnarok, and its jagged edge gleamed in the torchlight as he steeled himself for combat. “Ready when you are, Eiko.”

“All right... dispelling in three, two, one!” the summoner said. The storm waned and Fenrir returned to his realm. “Go!”

Roaring in unison, the five soldiers rushed into the hive. The giant Crawler let out a deafening screech and uncoiled itself, siccing what remained of its *children* on them.

“Stay back!” Steiner ordered as he gained speed, his weapon brimming with magic. He leaped straight into the incoming horde, and with a swing of the Ragnarok everything around him burst into flames.

“*The Climhazzard... I never thought I’d live to see it!*” Dionne thought, staring in awe at the fiery blast. The Broodmother’s mournful shrieks made her snap back to reality. “This is our chance! *Attack!*” she ordered, brandishing her hammer.

The Lindblumese squadron rushed past the Pluto Knight and charged straight at the abomination, blades reflecting Steiner’s miniature sun. The creature opened its maw and out came its own innards, coiled into a long, slimy appendage.

“Watch out!” the demi-hippo shouted.

With a violent flick of its head, the monster swung its exposed stomach at the soldiers like a

gigantic flail. Dionne, Vega and Mark slid right under the attack and resumed their charge without missing a beat, but Pip panicked and stood still, paralyzed by fear.

SLASH!

The Broodmother howled in agony; Steiner had intercepted its ‘*tongue*’ at the last second and chopped it in half, saving Pip from an early grave.

“You okay, private?”

“*T-t-thank you, s-sir...*” Pip stuttered, looking ready to faint.

“Begone, foul beast!” Major Dionne barked, using one of the creature’s claws as a stepping stone to jump onto its back. The Crawler thrashed and flailed around in a desperate attempt to get rid of her, sending both Mark and Vega flying, but she sank her hammer deep into its hide and held onto it, tenacious as a flea. After a particularly *brutal* shake, she was sent hurtling upward. The monster saw this as an opportunity to swallow her, so it opened its maw and waited for her to fall.

“*You want a piece of me?!*” the master-at-arms yelled, infusing her hammer with volatile magic until it started glowing. “*Then eat this!*”

With a mighty swing of her arm, she hurled the charged weapon straight into the creature's mouth; the poor thing couldn't even scream before an explosion tore its body asunder — ***SPLORK!*** — showering the chamber and everyone inside with gore.

“*Eeeww!*” Vega and Mark whined in unison, still splayed on the ground as the acrid gunge rained on them.

“*Woohooo! Hell yeah!*” Major Dionne cheered, bursting out of the Crawler's smoking carcass with an ecstatic grin on her face. “Lord Steiner, did you see *that*? It's my version of your mythic spell... *blade..?*”

Everybody glared daggers at her.

“Oh... sorry, guys.”

“Is it safe? Can we come in?” Eiko asked, peering into the chamber. “Ew... what the hell just happened?”

“I believe we have... *secured* the area,” Steiner answered, wiping a generous serving of monster mush off his face.

“*Okay sis, here we go,*” the young summoner muttered, empowering herself with a Might spell. She then effortlessly lifted Garnet and started carrying her into the murky chamber.

“Wouldn’t it be best if I carried her, Eiko?” the Pluto Knight asked, shooting a worried look at her lithe frame.

“I’m stronger than I look, y’know? Besides, I don’t want that crap you’re drenched in anywhere near her wounds,” she retorted, immediately taking an interest in the room itself. “Whoa, what *is* this place? This isn’t just some random hole in the earth!”

“I think it’s some kind of depot...” Lloyd ventured, pointing at a nearby stack of wooden boxes. “Or at least it *was* one, before Mother Nature reclaimed her turf.”

“A *depot*..? In the middle of this gods-forsaken forest?” Steiner exclaimed, approaching a metallic container caked with goo.

“Looks like a smuggler’s den to me,” Major Dionne stated. “And given the proximity to North Gate, it ain’t hard to figure out where are these crates coming from.”

“I-impossible! We’ve greatly reinforced our customs controls!” Steiner squawked, extremely embarrassed. “How could they smuggle this much stuff across the border?!”

“Any idea about what were they trafficking? Maybe we can salvage some supplies,” Eiko said.

“Hey guys! I’ve found something cool!” Mark yelled from across the room. He had opened one of the boxes and was staring at its content in awe.

“What is it, Mark?” the demi-hippo asked, walking up to him.

“It’s a fortune worth of magic stones!” the trooper piped up, showing her a clear case filled with glowing jewels. “Think of all the magitek you could power with these babies! It’s insane!”

“Dammit, soldier, you’re right!” Major Dionne exclaimed, grabbing a handful of gems and inspecting them. “Wait a minute, these things are *defective!*”

“What do you mean, ma’am?”

“Just look at it! The cut is terrible and its facets are riddled with flaws!” she said, holding out one of

the crystals. “Who in their right mind would buy this?”

Steiner opened his eyes so wide that Dionne thought they would pop out of their sockets.

“*R-riddled with flaws, you said?*” he stammered, taking a better look at the stone in her hand. “*N-no..! It can’t be..!*”

“What? What can’t be?” Eiko asked. “Steiner, answer me!”

The Pluto Knight clenched his fist around the gem and shot her the most somber stare one could imagine. “*This... is a forbidden instrument of war, Eiko.*”

The princess raised her eyebrows. “Please don’t tell me *that’s a summoning stone...*”

“No. It’s a crude *soulstone*, meant to power a mass-produced golem army,” the knight explained. “Sir Wulfweard was right... we’ve grown suicidally complacent.”

Eiko’s expression went bleak. *Soulstones*. She had hoped never to see one again.

“Soulstone? *I don’t like the sound of that...*” Dionne commented.

“You’re holding the crystallized remains of a soul... *a sentient soul*,” the summoner stated, trembling with hatred. “That *thing* is an affront to life itself, and whoever made it needs to be *destroyed*.”

Mark stared at the case in his hands, pure, undiluted horror creeping through him. *Were those souls still conscious? Could they hear them? What if -what if they were in a state of perpetual agony?* He felt a desperate urge to let the box fall and shatter into a million pieces; maybe he could put an end to their misery that way.

“Y-your Highness...” Vega stuttered, taking another jewel pack from the crate. “There’s more of them... dozens and dozens of them!”

Genocide. There was no other word for it.

“Eiko...” Steiner muttered, carefully approaching her; soul manipulation and anything black mage-related were highly sensitive topics for the young summoner. “Do you wish to take a little break..?”

The summoner blinked back her tears.

“Of course not. Thanks, Adelbert,” she answered, pulling herself together. “I think we should split up and gather as much intel as we can before leaving.

This place is a *goldmine* of evidence, and it won't be long before Ulrich sends a cleanup crew."

"I agree, but... what about Her Majesty?" Steiner stammered. "W-what if we linger too long and she..?"

"Let *me* worry about that. Doctor's orders," she retorted.

"Hmph... in that case, I'll scout ahead, see if I can find an exit," he said, pointing at a nearby passageway. "Make haste, though, we're running out of light sources."

"Got it. Please be careful out there, Steiner," the summoner answered. "All right, guys! Let's dig up some dirt!"

March 29th, 1820,?

?

"W-what?! Is Freya okay?!" Garnet squeaked.

“No... but she’s alive at least...” Frigg answered, lowering her eyes. “When that... *abomination* hurt her, I felt her pain as if it was my own.”

The queen found herself at a loss for words. Frigg’s knowledge of what had happened in Alexandria had been pieced together from vague visions, but it was more than enough to understand that a catastrophe had befallen the kingdom and that her loved ones were in great danger.

“To feel the pain of one’s child... I can’t imagine how horrible that must have been for you. I’m sorry,” she said.

“Thank you... as her mother and guardian spirit, I was granted the ability to sense her overall status by Father Berlioz himself,” the Burmecian stated. “Well... that until he excommunicated her and severed all ties between Folkvangr and her soul.”

The summoner’s train of thought ground to a halt.

“*Excommunicated*? What do you mean?” she inquired, wondering how much worse their situation could get.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but... he has decided to harvest her Dragon’s Crest,” Frigg sighed. “That

means permanent banishment from our community and...”

“... and?”

The Burmecian blinked back her tears.

“... and from the afterlife too.”

Garnet gaped at Frigg in disbelief.

“*No way!* She almost died saving Alexandria!” she exploded. “Does he even know how many Burmecians live there?!”

“Father has never been a reasonable man, alas...”

“What the..?!” Garnet exclaimed, turning around so fast that she almost fell on her backside; A tall, silver haired Burmecian dressed in a humble Cleyran tunic was smiling at her apologetically.

“Lord Gizamaluke...” Frigg said, bowing to him.

“*Huh..?! Wait, you’re that Gizamaluke?!* ” the summoner squeaked.

“Indeed. I’m glad to finally meet you, Queen Garnet,” he answered, politely nodding his head. His voice had an otherworldly echo to it, making

him far more unsettling than he intended to be. **“I’ve got no hard feelings, if that’s what’s worrying you,”** he added, letting out a chuckle.

“Oh, sorry! Where are my manners?” the monarch apologized, imitating his gesture much to Frigg’s amusement.

“Lord Gizamaluke is in charge of training those who Berlioz deems worthy of being Spear candidates,” the Burmecian explained. “He has generously offered to take Freya’s case in his hands.”

“I’ll make sure she earns Father’s blessing and restores peace between our nations,” the god declared.

“Sorry, I’m afraid I’m not following you,” Garnet interrupted him, raising an eyebrow. “With all due respect, didn’t your father just banish her from his church? Besides, why would she want to work for him after that?”

Gizamaluke cracked a lopped smile.

“I’ve never said she would work for *him*,” he stated. **“We’ll make *him* work for *us*.”**

With a faltering torch as his only companion, Steiner walked down a series of fetid tunnels, searching for a way out of the cavern. The floor was covered with human and Burmecian footsteps, coming and going in both senses, and the walls were outfitted with a powerstone-based lighting system, but it didn't work anymore.

As his own light grew dimmer, he started dragging his hand along the wall to avoid getting lost, and got quite startled when the monotonous, damp rock suddenly changed its texture to something more... *organic*.

“*Huh..? What’s this?*” he uttered, pausing to examine the strange object protruding from the stone. Dark, knotty bark covered its surface, and there was something *all too familiar* about it.

Steiner gasped.

“*Oh my..! This is an Iifa root!*” he thought, smiling as if he had just met a long-lost friend. He closed his eyes and listened carefully, straining to detect one particular sound.

“... and where there are roots, there must be...”

KLAK KLAK KLAK KLAK

“*Gargans!*” he exclaimed out of sheer joy, noticing the distinctive noise the colossal insects made as they crawled across Iifa’s roots.

“So this is how those bastards bypassed North Gate...” Eiko said, looking at the abandoned Gargan station that Steiner had just discovered. “Gotta give ’em credit, wouldn’t have guessed it in a million years.”

“I don’t get it... if this tunnel links Alexandria and Burmecia, why hasn’t Ulrich sent his soldiers to reclaim this place?” Major Dionne asked.

“That’s the best part!” Steiner chimed in, grinning from ear to ear. “Last week an earthquake struck the northwest of Alexandria and did a number on the Melda Arch. Nothing really serious as no lives were lost, but I’m guessing that things played out differently down here.”

“*The tunnel caved in...*” Dionne said. “Wait! The Burmecians in the woods! They weren’t looking for

Garnet! They were trying to access the cavern from the surface!”

“Bingo!” the Pluto Knight replied. “And guess what! There are still Gargans on this side! If we managed to call one, I bet it would get us out of this wretched forest!”

“I doubt it...” Eiko intervened. “Why then would he send his troops into Plant Brain territory? I bet my ass the real exit also got blocked by the quake.”

She could almost *hear* the group’s morale deflate like a balloon.

“So... what do we do now, ma’am?” Pip asked, the certainty of death becoming apparent on his tone.

“Steiner’s torch was flickering, right?” the summoner said, beginning to feel Garnet’s weight on her shoulders. “I propose we keep following the wind until we find a way out... and pray it isn’t guarded by monsters.”

Dionne’s torch went out, as if to emphasize how desperate their situation was.

“Mark, how many torches do we have left?” she asked.

“Four, ma’am, counting the murky ones we found in the storeroom...” the trooper answered, lighting a fresh one and handing it to her.

“Four... *heh*... all right,” the master-at-arms said, raising their meager light source. “Keep that sword handy, General... I’ll take point.”

None too convinced, the group ventured deeper into the dark.

**March 29th, 1820, Lebender Forest, Gunitas
Basin, Alexandria.**

18:50

Viciously rocked by the storm, the *HSC Madeen* had been flying above Lebender Forest for the better part of an hour, looking for the princess and her team with a large, hull-mounted spotlight.

“The winds are too violent, sir! We need to go back!” the pilot yelled, struggling to keep the ship aloft.

“If we do that, we’ll all hang from nooses! Keep searching!” Flynn, the second mate, ordered.

The aircraft shook from side to side.

“That’s it, I’m not not gonna die here,” the pilot said, brusquely steering the ship toward the east.

The feel of cold steel against his neck almost gave him a heart attack.

“Pull another stunt like that, and I’ll have you drawn and quartered. Am I clear, Errol?” the second mate snarled, holding him at swordpoint.

“Y-yes s-sir...”

“Good. Now keep search—”

A blinding flash of light coming from the forest interrupted him.

“What the hell is that?!” the pilot shrieked, as the radiance took the form of a majestic, fiery bird, soaring high above the treetops.

“T-that’s Phoenix!” Flynn exclaimed. “Lady Eiko must have summoned him to signal her location!”

“Holy shit...” the pilot uttered, steering the ship toward the Eidolon.

“All right, crew! We’ve found them! Flank speed ahead!” the second mate ordered.

The Madeen accelerated to its top speed, guided by Phoenix’s flames.

“There they are! I can see them!” a crewmember yelled, pointing the spotlight at a clearing below; Eiko was waving a torch at the ship while Steiner, Dionne and the Lindblumese soldiers desperately fought off wave after wave of Plant Spiders coming from every direction.

“They’re under attack!” Flynn shouted. “Gunners! Lay down cover fire! Errol, get us as close to the ground as possible! Biggs, Wedge, get the *basket* ready!”

“Yessir!”

Like a dragon, the Madeen spat a volley of fireballs from its twin magitek chain guns, creating a blazing ring around the survivors. With the airship hovering barely above the treetops, Biggs and Wedge lowered Flynn to the ground in a large basket-like structure attached to a steel cable.

“Flynn! I’m so glad to see you!” Eiko yelled, carrying Garnet to the rescue platform with the last

of her strength. “Guys, c’mon! Let’s get the hell outta here!”

While the second mate secured the queen to a special litter, the rest of Eiko’s team stopped fighting and rushed to the basket with the surviving monsters hot on their trail.

“Go! I’ll hold them off!” Steiner yelled, turning around and standing his ground against the incoming horde.

“Oh no, you’re not doing *that* again!” Major Dionne exclaimed, using her superior size to forcibly hoist him over her shoulder and carry him away.

“*Whoa!* Put me down!” the Pluto Knight shrieked.

“Yes, sir!” the demi-hippo replied, dropping him right next to Eiko with a loud **CLANG**. “Is everyone here? Good, let’s go!”

Flynn waved at the airship and the Madeen started gaining altitude. Biggs immediately activated the hydraulic winch and it began to slowly reel the cable in.

CHINK!

“What was that noise?!” Mark yelled, and then a bladed limb pierced the floor beneath him, missing his leg by mere inches. He panicked, stepped back and almost fell off the platform. “*Plant Spider!*” he yelled.

Without missing a beat, Eiko stole Dionne’s dagger from its sheath and plunged it right between the creature’s eyes; it twitched a little and let go of the structure, plummeting to its death.

Everybody gaped at the summoner in stunned silence.

“What? I wasn’t born a princess, y’know?” she justified herself, extending the dagger to the master-at-arms.

KRA-KOOM!

A huge lightning bolt hit Phoenix on the head, reminding everyone that they were still hanging from an airship in the middle of a thunderstorm.

“***Hmph... pathetic,***” the Eidolon sneered, his voice reverberating in Eiko’s mind. “***Send Sarah my regards.***”

“*I will! Thanks, buddy!*”

As his parting gift, the spirit dissipated into a glowing shower of healing magic.

19:30

Exhausted, hungry and with his armor caked with filth, Steiner waited outside the ship's operating room. He had stubbornly refused to even eat until he knew how Garnet was, and was about to fall asleep against the wall when Eiko walked out the door with a worried look on her face.

“How's Her Majesty?” the Pluto Knight asked.

“... I'm not gonna lie, I've seen healthier people on the slab, but I think she'll make it,” the summoner answered.

Steiner's eyes reddened. He sniffed, wiped his nose on the back of his arm, and pulled the princess into an awkward, but heartfelt hug.

“Thank you. I shall be forever in your debt for what you've done today,” he said.

Eiko smiled and patted him on the back.

“That’s what friends are for,” she muttered.

“Lady Eiko, we need your presence on the bridge!” Major Dionne said over the PA system, ruining the moment.

“*What now..?*” she whined, breaking the embrace. “Sorry, pal... why don’t you go catch some z’s? And for Ramuh’s sake, throw that armor into the fire! It reeks!”

Steiner chuckled.

“Will do. Good luck, Eiko,” he said as the summoner disappeared upstairs.

“It better be good, Dionne,” the princess said as she entered the command bridge.

“I sure hope it is, ma’am! Look!” Major Dionne answered, pointing at the horizon.

“Holy shit...” Eiko mumbled, gaping at the fleet of Lindblumese airships coming straight at them, led by none other than the *Hilda Garde IV* itself.

“*Dad..?*”

Author's note:

Aaaand so concludes part 2 (of 3)! Thanks for waiting, life hasn't been keen on, well, letting me breathe lately, hahaha!

I want to thank everybody who's still following this fic; I hope you're having a great time, and stay tuned for more!

25. Memoria (Part One)

“We live not to forget our past, but to learn from it.”

— Freya Crescent

A man and a little girl walked in hurried silence along the cobbled streets of Burmecia. He was a young but experienced dragoon. She was the heir to a lineage of heroes. The cold autumn rain bore down mercilessly upon them, soaking their clothes and plastering their fur as their shared umbrella was too small to fit two people.

“... Can you still walk, kid?”

The child sniffed and nodded. Her left eye throbbed with pain, but her pride had taken an even worse beating than her body.

“You know... defending your friends is admirable, Freya, but you need to be smarter about *how* you do it,” the man stated.

“They were hurting him, Mr. Rolfsen!” the girl huffed, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her coat. “I had to do something!”

“I know, but rushing headlong into fights you can’t win will just get you killed,” Sir Wulfweard retorted, this time in a stern tone. “Calling for help would have been a far better solution.”

An awkward silence grew between them, only interrupted by the drumming of droplets on the umbrella. Freya pouted and lowered her eyes, feeling utterly foolish. The knight sighed and refrained from further lecturing her. He didn’t like children or recklessness *at all*... but anything related to Frigg was a completely different story.

“... *I don’t get it*...” Freya croaked, shooting a disarming stare at him. “Why is everyone so mean to Cleyrans, Mr. Rolfsen?”

“Um...” he muttered, scratching the back of his head. He considered telling her about the Desert Star, but finally decided not to. “... I guess people often hate what they don’t understand.”

“It’s so unfair...”

“Hmm... you’re probably right.”

They kept walking in silence for a while until three small fingers shyly clung to his coat, surprising him.

“*Say something, you fool...*” he mentally chastised himself, craning an awkward look at the child; she was strong and righteous like her mother, yet she had her father’s sentimental heart. An unusual creature, born from an unlikely union.

Awkwardly, he let Freya hold his hand for the remainder of the walk.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Be right there, hold on a second!” a familiar voice yelled from inside the Crescent residence.

Freya shrunk in her spot. Her body ordered her to hide behind Sir Wulfweard, but she quickly dismissed the idea as preposterous. She could hear her father fumbling around, probably looking for his keys. Finally, the door creaked open and a short, hazel-haired Burmecian man stepped out, visibly confused by the dragon knight’s presence.

“Good afternoon, Fridgeir,” the warrior said, politely tipping his hat.

“Oh, hello Sir Wulfweard! Nice to...” the house owner answered, and then he noticed his little companion. “*Freya, what happened to you?!*” he exclaimed, rushing to her side.

“A gang of brats were picking on one of her friends for being part Cleyran and she jumped into the fray to defend him,” the dragoon explained. “I was on patrol duty and saw the situation. They won’t be bothering her again anytime soon.”

Fridgeir froze up. Secession-related hate crimes were tragically common those days, and even if he was proud of Freya’s courage, the idea of her becoming another victim terrified him on a primal level. Filled with a mixture of anguish and relief, he stood up and offered a deep bow to Wulfweard as per Cleyran tradition.

“... I can’t thank you enough for protecting my daughter,” he said. “Would you like to come in for a drink?”

“Oh... no, thanks. I should be heading back now,” Sir Wulfweard excused himself, tipping his hat. “Duty calls.”

“Mr. Rolfsen!” Freya exclaimed as he turned to leave.

“... Yes?”

“Thank you!”

The dragoon smiled.

“You have raised a fine daughter, Fridgeir,” he said, walking away. “Good afternoon.”

“May I see it?”

Freya nodded and lowered the compress, revealing an eye so swollen that she couldn’t even open it.

“*Tch... savages...*” Fridgeir muttered under his breath as he spread herbal paste on a moist cloth. “Would you please extend your arm, honey?”

She obeyed and her father applied the poultice to a particularly large hematoma.

“... Are you mad at me, dad?” Freya asked.

“Mad..? No, I’m not mad at you, Pumpkin. I’m just a little worried,” Fridgeir replied as he dressed the bruise. “If Mr. Wulfweard hadn’t intervened, those kids could have seriously hurt you.”

The girl lowered her eyes and sank into her seat, disappointed in herself.

“Don’t get me wrong; I love you and I’m proud of your brave, generous heart,” he said, booping her on the nose. “But you can’t take care of others if you don’t take care of yourself.”

“Yes, dad...”

The man stopped talking all of a sudden. Freya could tell that he had just had one of his ideas by the way he stroked his chin.

“Darling, can you keep a secret?” he asked with an unreadable expression.

“Sure!”

“Okay,” he said, touching his forehead with his fingertips. “Do you remember the stories I used to tell you about Lady Reis?”

“Yes! She’s a nice goddess who likes helping people a lot!”

“Heheh... you got that right,” Fridgeir replied, letting out a chuckle. “The thing is, she’s *real* and she wants to give you a present... but you must promise me that this will stay between us. Deal?”

“A present? For me?” Freya exclaimed, a big grin on her face. “Pleeease, daddy! I swear I won’t tell anyone!”

“Alright,” he said, closing his eyes. “*Mother Reis... hear my plea in this time of need.*”

An otherworldly gale blew into the room as his soul became a conduit for the goddess’ power. To Freya’s delight, the wind dissolved into a swirl of ghostly fireflies, dancing and fluttering around her like a miniature galaxy.

“*So beautiful..!*” she mumbled, fascinated by the spectacle.

“And it gets even cooler, look!”

The little Burmecian let out a gasp; a swarm of shimmering wisps had covered her arm. She giggled and waved it in the air, reveling in the spectral afterimages that the motion created. After a few seconds the sprites vanished into thin air, along with her injuries.

“Oh, my... *I can see!*” she yelled, overcome by excitement. “Daddy, it’s a miracle!”

“Exactly,” Fridgeir replied with a knowing smile. “Now tell me, Pumpkin... does your tummy still

ache?”

“My... wait, *what?*” Freya uttered, puzzled by his question. She craned a look at her midriff and nearly fell off her chair; *not only was she back to her adult self, but there were also two fresh scars where Lani’s claws had pierced her.* “W-what does this mean? What’s going on?!” she stammered.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” he answered with an apologetic smile. “I thought that showing you this memory would help me get my point across... guess it was a silly idea.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” she asked. “Wait... is this some kind of dying dream?”

“Dream? Yeah. Dying? Nah. You’ve got some pretty reliable friends out there,” her father answered. “You’re just sleeping, and I’ve come to keep you company.”

Freya froze up. She couldn’t talk, think or even cry. All she could do was to stare at him, utterly, hopelessly confused.

“... Dad?”

“Hi, Pumpkin...”

“B-but the cycle of souls..! No... *you can't be here!*” the dragoon stammered, springing to her feet. She wanted to believe he was there, *she wanted it more than anything else in the world*, but... what if she was just being toyed with? Everything was too *convenient* to be true.

“I know it's hard to believe, but...”

“No! *You died!* You died and returned to the Crystal!” she screamed with an increasingly broken voice. “I've mourned you! *I'VE MOURNED YOU, DAMMIT!*”

“Freya, please listen...”

“I get it now... you find all this amusing, don't you, Berlioz?” she pressed on, pointing an accusing finger at him. “Taking everything from me... tormenting me with visions of my family... does your cruelty know no bounds, you... *you beast?!!*”

“But I'm not..!”

“*Enough!*” the knight exploded, her desperation transmuted into scorching hatred. “*Curse you, false god!* I won't let you do this to me!”

“Freya, wait! Where are you going?”

“Away from you!” she yelled, bolting out of the house without giving him time to react.

“... Way to go, Fridgey...” the spirit sighed, taking two raincoats from the stand and chasing after her.

Freya ran and ran under the spectral downpour. Decades of dry weather had made her forget how merciless the rains of Burmecia could be, and her drenched bangs just wouldn’t stop getting in her eyes. The city wasn’t only devoid of life, but also seemed to be frozen in time years before the Mist War, judging by the presence of buildings that had been razed to the ground long since.

“I need a weapon... maybe in the palace...” the dragoon thought. She wasn’t expecting to outrun a god, especially in the spirit world, but she would at least face oblivion with defiance.

She turned left at an intersection only to find the man who claimed to be her father, standing in the middle of the street.

“Honey, please, I just wanna talk!” he yelled.

“Don’t you ‘*Honey*’ me, you piece of..!” she barked back, accelerating to a sprint with her fist raised; if Berlioz wouldn’t stop his little games, then she would play by her own rules.

CRACK!

“*Nrgh!*” Fridgeir uttered as his daughter punched him in the face so hard that he lost his footing.

“Huh..? Did you just..?” the dragon knight mumbled, surprised by how easily she had knocked him down; *Berlioz was just too prideful to let her humiliate him like that.*

“*Man, that hurt...*” the spirit groaned, clicking his jaw back into place. “*Drat... I think I’ve swallowed a tooth.*”

“What are you doing? I wasn’t even trying,” Freya sneered, trying to provoke the ‘god’ into blowing his cover.

“Well... I didn’t get to experience your rebellious phase, so I’m catching up on my parenting,” he answered, wiping the blood off his lip. “... Sort of.”

“... You’re ridiculous.”

“Why, thanks! I get that a lot.”

Freya stared at the downed man in disbelief. It was him. *It had to be him.*

“... How is this even possible?” she asked with a wavering voice.

Fridgeir smiled and rose to his feet with a little help from his daughter.

“By ridding you of his cursed seal, Berlioz has unwittingly set you free,” he answered. “Without his brand clouding your senses, he can no longer hide the truth from you.”

“The truth..?”

“He’s not as much in control as he’d like us to think,” the spirit stated, gazing at the overcast sky. “His influence on the cycle of souls weakens by the second. He’s grown awfully paranoid because of it.”

“Huh? Do you know why?” the dragoon asked, surprised by the revelation.

“Only Lady Reis does... sadly, she’s bound by an oath of silence, so we can only speculate about it,” Fridgeir answered, handing her an old crimson raincoat. “Anyway, you should be happy! You’re your own master now.”

The dragon knight took the garment and smiled nostalgically; *it had been her favorite one for a long time.*

“Isn’t it ironic..?” she muttered, holding the coat close to her chest. “I’ve dreamed of this day for decades... yet I can’t help feeling numb inside...”

“You’ve been through a lot...” her father said, brushing a strand of damp silver away from her eyes. “Most people in your place would have given up several times over, but not you. *Death* itself couldn’t stop you, and even if this... *ungrateful* world insists on forgetting it, I shall always remember that humans and gods *alike* are in your debt, my brave, beautiful Freya.”

Overcome by emotion, the dragon knight pulled him into a desperate embrace, dreading that he would slip through her fingers at any moment.

“*I love you... I love you so much...*” she sobbed against his chest. *He was there.* He was there with her and nothing else mattered. “*I have so many questions... there’s so much I need to tell you!*”

The rain stopped falling and the sky abruptly shattered like glass. Beams of light started seeping through the cracks, consuming the dream like a fire.

“... I’m afraid we’ll have to leave it for another time, my dear,” Fridgeir said, holding her tight as the world collapsed around them.

“No... I don’t want to lose you again..!” she croaked, digging her nails into his coat.

“Freya, listen to me,” her father said, cupping her face in his hands. “You’ve been granted a second chance. Make the most of it! Follow your heart, but don’t forget to love yourself. Deal?”

“... Deal,” she answered, blurry jade meeting warm sapphire. “Will I see you again?”

“Yeah! Sooner than you think.”

“Promise..?”

“Promise,” he replied, nuzzling her one last time as he vanished into the light. “Just keep me in your thoughts and I’ll find you!”

“I will...” Freya said with a peaceful smile, memorizing the feel of his touch. “... Till next time, dad.”

Author’s note:

I would like to thank Érica for proofreading this mini-chapter. Second part in a few days!

26. Memoria (Part Two)

**March 30th, 1820, War Room, Alexandria
Castle.**

23:30

“How are the search and rescue teams faring?” Zidane asked, trying his hardest not to fall asleep in front of the assembly.

“Sir, we’ve finished scouting the Market District,” an officer said. “We’ve found survivors hiding among the ruins and captured nine more machines.”

“Good. What about the residential areas?”

“Secured. The fires have been successfully contained,” another soldier replied. “There’s much rebuilding to do, though... many have lost everything they had.”

“Can you give me an estimate?”

“Almost a thousand souls, sir...”

“Dammit...” the genome groaned, tiredly rubbing his temples.

“Your Majesty...” an unexpected voice chimed in. “I know several families who are willing to give these people sanctuary.”

“Much appreciated, Sir Osbern,” Zidane answered, nodding his head. The knight seemed pleased by the gesture and answered with a Burmecian salute, inadvertently upsetting some of the more orthodox members of the council.

“Ahem... we’ve already started repurposing parts of the Industrial District to house IDPs,” Steiner added, marking two areas on the city map. He was about to pinpoint a third one when an irresistible fit of yawning prevented him from continuing. Three soft knocks on the door yanked the group’s attention away from him, allowing him to save face.

“Come on in!” Zidane ordered.

A bald Pluto knight cracked the door open, approached the king and whispered something in his ear.

“Understood. Thanks, Breireicht,” he said, standing up and waving Steiner closer. “Adelbert,

come with me. The rest, please carry on. I'll be back in a second."

"Are you sure you don't need me out there?" Steiner asked as he followed Zidane down a corridor. "I may be old, but I'm still fit for work!"

"Dude, you almost fell asleep in the war room," the genome retorted. "Besides, Bea has just woken up and she's... a bit lost."

"Lost..? W-What do you mean?"

The genome stopped in front of a wooden door.

"Remember what I've told you about the consequences of soul torching?" he asked with a grave expression.

"... How bad is it?"

"*Lady Beatrix, please calm down! I'm not gonna hurt you!*" a female voice yelled from inside the room.

"*Get your filthy hands off me, scum! Can anyone hear me?! Heeelp!*" a second voice screamed and Steiner's heart skipped a beat.

“... She doesn’t even know where she is,” Zidane stated, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, pal...”

The Pluto knight stared at his king with a mixture of pain and disbelief. Taking a deep breath, he pulled himself together and cracked the door open.

“H-Hello, Bea...”

The most feared warrior in Alexandrian history shot a terrified look at him from the far side of the room. One of her loyal knights was trying to soothe her, but she was so tense that Steiner thought she would pounce on him if he so much as *blinked*.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re here, sir,” the soldier sighed, visibly relieved.

“Thanks, Lydia, I’ll take over from here,” Steiner answered, clearing the entrance.

“Yes, sir,” she muttered before scuttling out of the bedchamber. Zidane worriedly arched his eyebrows at the Pluto knight, but he waved his concerns away and closed the door behind him.

“What do you want from me?!” Beatrix barked, her ruffled, snowy locks obscuring much of her face. “Why are you keeping me here?!”

Steiner took a wooden chair, carefully left it near his wife and sat on the unmade bed, facing her.

“... Do you remember me?” he asked, his heart in his throat.

She studied him from head to toe, searching for his name in the depths of her mangled memory. Something seemed to stir within her, because her scowl suddenly softened.

“Y-You’re Adelbert..!” she stammered, brushing her hair away from her eye. “We... we’re *married*, aren’t we?”

“Yes... oh, thanks gods, *yes!*” the Pluto knight mumbled, relieved to the point of tears.

01:15

“When will she wake up, mom?”

“Your aunt is a tough woman, Tot. I’m sure she’ll be up in no time.”

“She looks so peaceful... what do you think she’s dreaming about?”

“... Home, maybe?”

“Oh... I wish she would stay with us forever.”

“She’s certainly fun to be around, isn’t she?”

“Yeah... wait..! Did you see that?”

“What’s wrong?”

“S-She moved..!”

“What?”

“I’m totally sure she just moved!”

“She’s waking up! Tot, go get Eiko, quick!”

“R-Right away!”

Freya opened her eyes as the little genome rocketed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

“Hnnn... where am I..?” she groaned, trying to sit up.

“Hi there, sleepyhead,” Garnet greeted her, sitting on a nearby bed.

“Garnet..? *Is that you?*” the Burmecian asked, blinking repeatedly as her sight adjusted to the dim lamplight.

“The one and only...” the summoner quipped half-heartedly. “I’m glad you’re awake.”

Something about the way Freya’s ears twitched once her eyes focused elicited a depressed chuckle from the queen.

“Go on, say it...” she sighed, averting her gaze. “Don’t be shy.”

“*W-What happened to you..?*”

The queen took a deep breath and returned the dragoon’s stare.

“The Wind Rose was sabotaged,” she explained, idly tracing the fresh scars on her face with a finger. “That traitor, *Horst*... he planted a bomb on the ship and blew us out of the sky.”

Freya’s jaw slackened.

“How did you *survive* that?”

The monarch’s expression lightened a bit as she drew Frigg’s pendant out of her nightgown.

“Your mom sends her regards.”

“I see...” the dragon knight said with the faintest of smiles. “What about Steiner and the others? Are they okay?”

Garnet lowered her eyes.

“Steiner’s fine, but we got separated from our crew and their fates remain... *uncertain*,” she said, almost in a whisper. “The Quicksilver was destroyed in the same manner, and our rescue teams haven’t found any survivors yet...”

“*Why..? Why would Bishop go that far..?*” the Burmecian wondered, amazed by the depth of her viciousness.

“Freya, there’s something I need to tell you...” the queen said, shooting a glance at the door. “That demi-god you mentioned, Gizamaluke... he spoke to me in my dreams.”

“*Lord Gizamaluke..?*” the dragoon gasped, taken off guard. “What did he say?”

“He has a plan to help you win the throne of Burmecia,” the sovereign replied. “Your mother seems to trust him, but I certainly don’t. He’s Berlioz’s son after all.”

“Well... actually, they *openly* despise each other,” Freya stated, pensively stroking her chin. “Berlioz had long since abandoned him when Kuja’s minions invaded his sanctuary. Looks like dying has only made him *stronger*.”

Garnet blinked dumbly at her.

“... *Are you kidding me?* Why is he still training Spear candidates, then?”

“Because to earn the title, one needs to face Berlioz in single combat *and survive*,” the Burmecian explained. “He probably sees me as a chance both to humiliate his father and to further his own political agenda.”

The summoner let out a wry chuckle.

“... Even the gods can be petty jerks, eh?”

“Hear, hear.”

“So... what will you do?”

“I think some research is in order...” the dragoon answered. “I can’t team up with someone whose true motivations remain a mystery.”

“*Agreed*. With the continent at war yet again, gambling is a luxury we can’t afford,” Garnet stated.

“*The continent..?*” Freya repeated, arching an eyebrow. “Wait, what did I miss?”

“Lindblum has officially entered the conflict,” the summoner explained. “If it weren’t for Cid and his fleet arriving in the nick of time, Treno’s ships would have decimated our defenses and finished what their troops started.”

“Oh... well, I’m glad the regent hasn’t lost his sense of timing...”

“It’s one of the few things we can be glad about,” Garnet bitterly remarked. “Zid went berserk while defending the castle and caused *a lot* of collateral damage. It’s a miracle he didn’t kill anyone.”

Freya stared blankly at her.

“Wait, those explosions were *his* doing?!” she squawked, beginning to see the bigger picture.

The queen glanced nervously at the door and then leaned closer to her.

“*Look, he’s been struggling to control his Trance form, just like you have,*” she said, lowering her voice to a whisper. “... *However, Mikoto told me that yesterday you managed to turn without going feral. I need to know how you did it.*”

“Well, I...” the dragon knight muttered, recalling the experience. The sound of hurried steps coming from outside distracted her.

“*That’s them!*” Garnet hissed. “*Work with me here, Freya!*”

“*Wait, what do you..?!*”

As if answering her unfinished question, Zidane threw the door open, his face contorted with anguish.

“*Are you nuts?! You’re gonna scare ’em to death!*” a high pitched voice shrieked from the hallway, but he had already crossed the room in three strides and pulled his friend into a desperate embrace.

“Hi...” Freya murmured, awkwardly glancing at Garnet as the genome struggled not to dissolve into sobs. The queen arched her eyebrows, a little startled, but decided to smile and take the situation in stride.

“Hi...” Zidane answered, clenching his teeth to prevent them from chattering.

Eiko barged in, bent on scolding the monkey king for his trouble. She was about to launch on a tirade

when the young prince of Alexandria dashed past her with a huge grin, yelling “*Auntie Freya! You’re awake!*” at the top of his lungs.

“Hello there, little one!” the dragon knight said, welcoming the timely distraction. “It’s nice to see a cheerful face around here!”

“I’m doing my best to keep everyone’s spirits up!” the boy replied, catching her off guard. “Mom and dad always say it’s important to support the people you love in times of trouble!”

“Oh... your parents have taught you well,” Freya commented, affectionately ruffling his hair.

“Miko told me you fought two dozen golems on your own! That’s so *badass!*”

“Tot, *vocabulary*,” Garnet said exasperatedly, rubbing her forehead.

“Sorry, mom...” the boy apologized, but everyone could tell he didn’t mean it. “Hey, auntie! Can you teach me how to be an awesome dragon knight like you when you’re feeling better? *Pleeease!*” he begged, making his best puppy face.

Freya flinched; Tot didn’t know it, but every master dragoon was expected to pass down the *Art*

to an apprentice. She had instructed soldiers before as part of her duties, but tutoring a pupil was a different, *far* more personal affair. She studied the little genome from head to toe, wondering if he had what it took to be a warrior; he was too scrawny and naïve for his own good, but he possessed his father's absurd agility and only the gods knew what kind of power he had inherited from his mother. Most importantly, he had a strong, compassionate heart and she loved him like a son because of it.

"Tot, I think it's too soon to ask her for that kind of stuff. She needs to rest now," Zidane said, coming to her aid. Tot pouted, but accepted his father's remark.

Apprenticing the prince of a former enemy nation was a dangerous move, Freya thought. Not only was it unprecedented (*what would Sir Wulfweard say!*), but teaching the secrets of her people to an Alexandrian royal would have unforeseeable political consequences. On the other hand, his willingness to embrace her culture filled her with hope, so she opted for a middle ground solution until she figured out what was best for everyone involved.

"Keep being such a sweet little guy and I'll teach you a thing or two," she whispered in his ear,

eliciting a delighted grin from him.

“A-Are you serious?!” the kid stuttered, melting her heart with his big round eyes. Everybody gaped at the dragon knight as she nodded, smiling warmly.

“Zid, how’s everything going out there?” Garnet asked, swiftly changing the subject.

“It’s a bit of a chaos, but things are slowly calming down,” the king said tiredly, stretching out his back.

“What about you? Are *you* okay?” she pressed on, asking Freya for assistance with a quick glance. “You sound exhausted, my love.”

“Don’t sweat it, babe, I was raised in Lindblum, remember? I can party for days!” he retorted with a wink that only drew further attention to the dark circles under his eyes.

“Then why are you so twitchy?” the dragon knight bluntly pointed out.

“What? I’m not..!” Zidane squawked, only to realize that his hands were trembling. “Aw, shit... not again...”

Garnet and Eiko exchanged alarmed stares and nodded in agreement.

“Hey Tot! Wanna meet a friend o’ mine?” the blue-haired princess offered with a mischievous glint in her eye. “He’s big, fluffy and loves chasing his tail.”

“I didn’t know you had a dog!” Tot exclaimed, following her out of the room.

“Yeah... *dog*...”

“... Guess I’m in for an earful, eh?” Zidane commented once his son was well out of earshot.

“Honey, look at you!” the queen exclaimed. “You can barely stand! You need to rest!”

“C’mon, Dag, you know I can’t do that,” he groaned, folding his arms in an attempt to control the tremors. “Besides, I’m okay! Just a little tired, that’s all.”

“Zidane, this is serious!” Freya intervened, surprising the royal couple. “Think of your family! You can’t risk another episode!”

The king stared at her in silent shock for a moment.

“... She knows *everything*, doesn’t she?” he said, shooting an offended glare at his wife. “I can’t believe you’ve spilled the beans about this!”

“*What if she did?*” the dragoon exclaimed, yanking his attention back to herself. “Aren’t we supposed to be friends? Dragon pals and all that?”

“You wouldn’t understand...”

“Why wouldn’t I? We *are* in the same boat, remember?” she remarked, driving him into a corner.

“No, we’re **not!**” Zidane barked, making the room *tremble*. “I was *supposed* to prevent this from happening! *Hundreds* have died today because I couldn’t protect them! How can you girls possibly expect me to sleep while the city burns?!”

“You’ve just proved my point...” the Burmecian answered with a faint, regretful smile. “I know *exactly* how you’re feeling, but heaping all the blame onto yourself will only complicate things further.”

“Freya, I’ve fucking sent you *and my sister* on a *suicide mission*! Garnet, Eiko and Steiner almost became plant food because I couldn’t be bothered to check the Wind Rose myself! **I blew up half of the castle with my son inside, goddammit!**” the king screamed as energy arced around him, heralding the awakening of the Beast.

“*Oh gods, he’s gonna turn any second..!*” the Burmecian thought, glancing at the window; maybe she could grab Garnet and jump out before it was too late.

“Zid, stop! You’re twisting the facts!” Garnet yelled. “It wasn’t your-!”

CRACK!

Freya’s eyes widened; a stray lightning bolt had struck the summoner, knocking her flat on her back.

“*Garnet..!*” she gasped and then turned to shoot a *blazing* glare at the horrified genome. “What have you done, you *imbecile?!!*” she spat, but the sound of hard breathing cut her off.

“***You stubborn, imprudent dolt..!***” the queen uttered through gritted teeth, slowly sitting up. She was panting heavily and a shimmering haze had started to form around her.

“H-Honey, I...” the king stammered as her wounds began to glow like stars.

“SHUT UP!”

A flash of glorious light flooded the room, temporarily blinding Zidane and Freya.

“*Rrrgh..!*” the genome uttered, tripping and falling backwards as he tried to shield his eyes from the radiance.

“Garnet, please... stop!” the Burmecian yelled, disoriented and in pain due to the sensory overload.

Realizing that she was hurting her loved ones allowed the summoner to resist the pull of madness. She closed her eyes, steadied her breath and focused on reining in her power. Little by little, her aura dimmed to a bearable intensity, revealing a creature more akin to a goddess than a mortal.

“Dag... are you okay?” Zidane asked, riddled with guilt.

A pair of glowing pupils fixed him.

“... **Yes,**” she replied. Her voice sounded like a choir speaking at once.

“Don’t you hear any strange voices?” the dragoon asked, amazed by the degree of control that she had over her Trance form; she wondered if her mystical blood had anything to do with it.

“The only thing I hear is my knuckleheaded husband, putting us all in danger because he

can't stop being a martyr without a cause!"
Garnet replied, walking past her.

"*Ouch...*" the genome muttered, averting his face in shame. "Sorry... I've *really* done it this time."

The goddess stood face to face with him for a moment and finally let out an exasperated sigh.

"... You weren't in your right mind, Zid," she said. **"That's why you *need* to take a break."**

"Thanks... but I don't think it will be enough," he answered as his crimson eyes returned to their usual teal blue. "There's something *very* wrong with me, Dag..."

"Then we'll deal with it, together!" she exclaimed, taking his hands in hers and giving them a light squeeze.

"But... what if we can't? *What if you get hurt?* What if-?"

Before he could finish his sentence, she grabbed him by the collar and pulled him into a fiery kiss. Twenty years ago, Freya would have snorted with laughter at the sight of *Zidane, of all people*, getting shut down like that, but *this time* smiling came to her as naturally as breathing.

“Yeah... maybe you’re right...” the genome thought, abandoning himself to Garnet’s embrace.

27. End of the Line

**March 29th, 1820, Rolfsen Estate, Daines-
Horse Basin, Burmecia.**

18:00

“They’re breathtaking, aren’t they?” Wulfweard asked.

Reluctantly, Fratley stole a glance at the crooked cherry tree; Its pale flower clusters were in full bloom, making it look like a fluffy earthbound cloud.

“... Yes, sir.”

“Do you know what makes them unique?”

“... Their daintiness, perhaps?”

“Their *transience*,” the old dragoon corrected him, closing his eyes and drawing on the ethereal perfume of the garden. “They’re just like *life itself*; sublime, yet fleeting.”

“... Why are you telling me this, sir?”

“Because these flowers have something fascinating to teach us,” the knight replied. “Look at them; they *know* how scarce their time is... yet they choose to selflessly invest it into making this world a little less hideous.”

The blond warrior lowered his gaze and remained silent for a while.

“... Helping others is the only thing I’ve ever wanted... yet I always wind up hurting everyone I love,” he finally said. “Now the kingdom is divided, we’ve become fugitives, and by some cruel whim of fate, I’m still breathing.”

“Hmph... I don’t remember raising you to be a coward, boy.”

Fratley craned an offended glare at his former instructor.

“I betrayed you and joined the man who murdered our king! Your friend!” he blurted out with a broken voice. “Why did you risk it all to save a piece of scum like me?”

The old knight plucked a single white petal off the breeze and entrusted it to his student as if it was the most valuable treasure in the world. Astonished, Fratley stared at him with a mixture of shock and

disbelief, but the dragoon dispelled his doubts with a nod of his snowy head.

“Huh?! Y-You can’t be serious..!”

Wulfweard smirked, amused by his student’s reaction, and continued contemplating the cherry tree.

“One day I may not come back, boy... we need to be ready.”

“B-but what about Astrid, or Bryn, or Sigfred?” Fratley stammered, his body language becoming increasingly frantic. “Heck, *Sigrunn* would make a better successor than me!”

“Astrid’s position in the council is critical to organize a proper resistance. Sigfred and Sigrunn are too brash, *too young* for the job, and Brynhild is too much of a follower to lead,” the old dragoon listed. “As powerful as Freya may have become, we can’t let the fate of our people rest solely upon her shoulders. We need your strength and experience, Fratley... someone has to make sure the flame stays alight no matter what.”

An awkward silence grew between the two as the blond knight absentmindedly fidgeted with the petal in his hand.

“So it’s true...” he muttered, a knot slowly forming in his throat. “She will actually do it...”

“... I’m afraid she will.”

Fratley’s slouch deepened, and the colonel picked up on it.

“... You still love her, don’t you?”

The younger dragoon averted his face in shame.

“Whatever feelings I may harbor do not matter anymore, sir.”

“I understand...” Wulfweard replied, leaving it at that. His lips inadvertently curled into a melancholic smile, and Fratley decided it was his turn to ask the awkward questions.

“With all due respect, master... why are you smiling?”

“*Oh..!* Um...” he hesitated, surprised. “I was just thinking about... uh...”

His student snorted, earning himself an irate glare.

“Sorry, sir, it’s just so... *unusual* to see you acting all flustered,” he said, sheepishly waving his

hands. Driven by perverse curiosity, he pushed his luck even further. "... Were you thinking about Lady Astrid, perhaps?"

"That's none of your *godsdamn* business, soldier!" the old dragoon barked, poking him with a claw for emphasis.

"O-Okay, just kidding..! Sorry, sir..!" Fratley blurted out, reverting to his habitual politeness.

"And stop apologizing before I send you back to Ulrich *with a huge pink bow on your head!*"

Master and apprentice exchanged amused stares and burst into laughter at the ridiculous imagery. Thunder growled in the distance, snapping them back to reality.

"*Hmm...* that might prove inconvenient..." Wulfweard commented as the scent of incoming rain started filling the air. "I really hope Queen Garnet doesn't get caught in that storm..."

The younger knight huffed in disgust, bitter resentment twisting his ever-affable expression into a deep scowl.

"... What's the matter, boy?"

“Nothing... only that she wouldn’t have to worry about the weather if she had bothered to get here in time.”

“Hmm... you’re right... it’s not like her to be *this* tardy, however...”

“*Tardy?*” Fratley squawked, glowering at the colonel. “I’d rather say *disrespectful!*”

Wulfweard gave him an unreadable look. He wasn’t in the mood to argue, but if he was going to designate him as his potential replacement, he needed to make sure they were at least on similar wavelengths.

“... You *really* hate her, don’t you?”

“*Of course I do! Nothing good can be expected from Brahne’s child!*” the knight boomed.

“... Yet we owe her our lives and freedom,” Wulfweard pointed out.

“*Pfft...* Alexandrian propaganda,” Fratley riposted. “She *knew* she couldn’t keep us under control for much longer, so she withdrew and called it *liberation*. Besides, she once abandoned Freya to die out of cowardice, so it’s safe to assume that her exploits have been *greatly* embellished.”

“Oh, you mean like the time you left her to fend for herself against a freaking *Eidolon*?” the old dragoon retorted, and his apprentice recoiled as if a snake had bitten him.

“*How can you possibly say that?!*” he exploded, utterly offended. “*I was clearing a path for the survivors to escape!*”

“And Garnet was helping Freya’s loved ones flee from her own mother,” Wulfweard stated, finally cornering his student. “See? Cementing your worldview on half-truths will only lead you down the path of injustice.”

“... That still doesn’t change the fact that Puck made us weak, dependent on her... *charity* to survive,” Fratley grumbled, folding his arms. “We used to be a nation of conquerors... Father Berlioz’s chosen children, dang it! *Look at us now!* Dragging ourselves through the mud, eating the crumbs that fall from our masters’ table...”

“Would you rather go back to perpetual war, then? Just to quench your thirst for glory?”

“Well... n-no, but...”

The colonel sighed.

“Listen, boy... I know what you’re going through...” he said dejectedly, his sudden change in tone surprising his pupil. “You were raised to be a warrior, just like me and my parents before me... but in this new, mist-less world, people like us seem to no longer have a purpose.”

Fratley hung his head in silent, defeated agreement.

“... Albeit flawed and naïve, King Puck had a wonderful vision... a peaceful, industrialized kingdom, where nobody would have to become a killer to thrive,” the colonel fondly reminisced. “That’s why he was excommunicated... branded a traitor.”

“Master... you *do* realize that straying from the Allfather’s teachings like that could make Fólkvangr forever unreachable for our people... *right?*”

“Yes...” the old dragoon answered, visibly conflicted about what he was going to say. “... However, in this new global order, a nation that only produces slayers makes little economical sense. We need to stop obsessing about the afterlife and start building an actual future for our children.”

“Um... Master Wulfweard,” Sigrunn chimed in, stepping out of the hideout in travel clothes. “Sorry for interrupting, but it’s past time we left.”

“Oh, thanks Siggie. I’ll join you in a minute,” he answered.

“Sir... is this *absolutely* necessary?” Fratley asked, guilt and fear relentlessly gnawing at his heart.

“Disappearing now could leave the Resistance in a pretty bad spot,” the old knight explained, resting a hand on his apprentice’s shoulder. “We need to make sure our ideals aren’t stained by our personal failures.”

“I... I’m sorry, master...”

“Don’t be. Just stop ruminating about the past and start fighting for those who can’t defend themselves,” Wulfweard said as he left. “That’s what we, Dragon Knights, were always meant to do, Sir Fratley.”

March 29th, 1820, Royal Palace, Burmecia.

18:00

“So... what now?” Ulrich finally asked.

President Bishop leveled a pensive stare at him.

“We need a scapegoat, and we need it now,” she answered, icy, calculating eyes glistening in the lamplight. “Didn’t you say last night that one of your enemies was involved in the bombing of a dreadnought?”

“I said he was *probably* involved,” the chancellor clarified. “We don’t have enough evidence to prove it yet.”

Margaret let out a sigh and reclined on her couch.

“Don’t worry, sister, the Jägers have been working on it non-stop,” Ulrich added. “If someone can find a connection between the attack and Sir Wulfweard, that’s them.”

“I sure hope so...” Margaret stated, tiredly rubbing the spot between her eyes. “I’m still trying to understand *how* and *when* did this operation go awry...”

“Hmm... maybe we got a little greedy with Lindblum...” the Dragonslayer ventured. “Cid has proven a *way* more cunning adversary than Garnet.”

“Still... had things gone according to plan, he would have been too late to do anything,” Bishop countered. “How on Gaia did those illiterate *brutes* figure out the inner workings of our Neo-Waltzes?”

“Well... according to our agents, the king’s sister was staying at the castle when the invasion began,” the usurper recalled. “Do you think she had anything to do with it?”

“Ah, yes... I remember that elusive little hermit...” the Trenoite said. “She’s *a lot* more interesting than her brother, that’s for sure. I’ve always wondered who she *really* is.”

“She seems to live somewhere in the Forgotten Continent, but nobody has been able to follow her home,” Ulrich commented. “How does she survive on that cursed wasteland, at that?”

A realization suddenly hit Margaret like a hammer.

“Isn’t it obvious, brother?” she excitedly answered. “Let me put it this way; her ship is *absurdly fast*, even by our standards...”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with..?”

The Dragonslayer blanched under his thick cinnamon coat, a look of alarm appearing on his face as he began to see the bigger picture.

“No way...” he mumbled. “*Could she have ties to..?*”

“... Lord King?” Bishop completed his sentence, a dangerous smile creeping up her visage. “Think about it; a mysterious young woman of uncertain origins shows up in an impossibly advanced aircraft, and suddenly Alexandria knows how to counter weapons the world had yet to see in action.”

Ulrich gasped.

“That would also explain why Treno lost the Succession War sixteen years ago!” he exclaimed, splintering the wooden coffee table with his fist. “*That bitch..!* Do you think she knew about our plan?”

“*Hardly,*” Margaret answered. “Had she been aware of our strategy, Alexandria’s army would have stormed our hideouts right away. No, no, no... something else happened here. They had intel on us, true, but it was obviously incomplete.”

“Perhaps someone sold them the blueprints...” the Burmecian theorized.

“Maybe. That still doesn’t explain how did they crack our encryption,” Bishop answered. “Anyway, there’s clearly a mole among our ranks, and we need to do something about it ASAP.”

Knock, knock, knock...

“I’m busy right now!” Ulrich shouted.

“*Lord Chancellor, you need to see this,*” a deep, raspy voice answered from the hallway.

“*Gunnar..?*” the Dragonslayer muttered as he headed for the door. The commander of the *Jägers*, Burmecia’s special operations unit, was waiting for him outside.

“*God kväll, sir,*” the soldier uttered, solemnly bowing his head. Despite his advanced age and Ulrich’s tall, muscular frame, he easily towered over him, looking more like a Gnoll in dragoon armor than a Burmecian. The giant knight produced a paper envelope and extended it to the chancellor. “I apologize for the interruption, but we have successfully completed our assignment.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down, Gunnar,” Ulrich answered, opening the package and pulling out a report. As he skimmed over it, his lips slowly

curled into a victorious grin. "... Are you positive about this?"

The ironclad colossus nodded his head once again.

"Alright, then... this is what I need you to do..." the Dragonslayer said, a deadly glint in his eye.

March 29th, 1820, Palace Square, Burmecia.

20:00

Contrary to popular belief, Burmecian funerals were often joyful events. Bards were hired to sing about the deceased's exploits as the mourners danced, feasted and (though it had largely fallen out of practice since the Reunification) sacrificed beasts in the Allfather's honor.

It was logical from their point of view; those who followed Lord Berlioz's teachings and bore the coveted Mark of the Dragonslayer were all but guaranteed an eternity of bliss at his realm. Heretics, pacifists and failed warriors, on the other hand,

received far quieter burials due to the uncertain fate of their souls.

Puck's funeral was certainly a humble one.

Walking in silent procession among Puck's followers, Sir Wulfweard and Sigrunn scanned their surroundings for signs of danger. The first thing that caught their attention was the conspicuous absence of Queen Garnet and Regent Cid; President Bishop was in fact the only foreign head of government at the event, and the two Partisans could hardly bear the little, satisfied glances she occasionally stole at the royal catafalque.

"... Do you think something bad happened to them?" Sigrunn whispered in her instructor's ear.

"I really hope not..." he replied.

"Look at the diplomats... they have no idea what's going on!"

Indeed, the Alexandrian and Lindblumese dignitaries were exchanging confused, uneasy looks.

"They are being deliberately kept in the dark," the old knight theorized. "Ulrich must have established some sort of information blockade..."

"... What is that psycho trying to hide..?"

“Whatever it is, it must be *huge*...” the old knight answered. “This is worse than I expected.”

“Umm... master?”

“Yes, Sigrunn?”

“Big fucking trouble at three o’clock...”

The elderly dragoon sneaked a glance at the incoming mountain of muscle and smirked.

“Hmph... *interesting choice*...” he commented in an amused tone, much to his apprentice’s bewilderment.

“*Interesting choice...? That’s freaking Gunnar Ironhide coming at us, sir!*” she panicked. “*What are we supposed to do now?!*”

“*Relax*. He won’t start a fight in the middle of a crowd,” her teacher reassured her. “Now pull yourself together and let *me* do the talking.”

“*Yessir...*”

“Wulfweard, *min gamlevän!*” the giant exclaimed as he caught up to them. “Mind if I join you?”

“Gunnar, my old friend! It’s been a while!” the dragoon replied, affectionately patting the Jäger’s

back as if the Mist War and all the tragedies that ensued hadn't turned them into bitter enemies.

"It sure has!" Gunnar answered, switching his attention to Sigrunn. "*Hej*, Siggie! I can't believe how much you've grown!"

"Um... thank you, sir..." she stammered, feeling as if Death itself was staring at her.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the giant said. "We may not have agreed on most things, but Puck deserved better than this. He was a Spear of Berlioz after all."

"Indeed..." Wulfweard sighed.

For the rest of the walk, Sir Gunnar doggedly stuck with the Partisans, making his purpose abundantly clear despite his jovial, yet nostalgic banter.

"Remember that time we saved that lost private on Qu's Marsh?" he would ask his former squadmate, much to the latter's annoyance. "What was he called, Ryan?"

"Raegar," Wulfweard answered, indulging Gunnar's rambling out of a lack of options.

"Raegar, yeah! *Gwahahaha!* Poor kid... the Qus sure are *terrifying* when they're angry!"

“M-hmm...”

The procession continued for another thirty minutes until they reached the Glade of Kings, Burmecia’s royal graveyard. Once Puck’s catafalque was placed over the funerary pyre, the jolly Jäger stopped blabbering and started praying, much to the Partisans’ relief. In a way, Wulfweard appreciated Gunnar’s charade; he knew only one of them would live to see the sunrise, but it made him oddly happy to pretend they were still friends.

The ominous blare of mythrils horns echoed across the plains, signaling the beginning of the ceremony. Ulrich stepped out of the crowd and knelt in front of the pyre. There, he prayed for the late king’s soul under the watchful eyes of the assembly.

“*Oh, stop embarrassing yourself...*” Wulfweard thought, rolling his eyes.

After a brief moment of silence, the chancellor completed the ritual and stood up.

“People of Burmecia!” he shouted. “Today we are gathered not only to mourn the loss of a great leader, king and friend...”

A dragoon in ceremonial uniform suddenly approached him and whispered something in his ear,

eliciting a look of pure shock and horror from him.

“What the hell..?” Sigrunn muttered, squinting in a futile attempt to read his lips.

The knight then gave the chancellor a telegram and the politician started reading it in stunned silence. After a few tense seconds, Ulrich leveled a troubled stare at the crowd and awkwardly cleared his throat.

“Um... before continuing, I would like to extend Regent Cid Fabool of Lindblum and Queen Garnet Til Alexandros of Alexandria our deepest sympathies, as word has just reached me that an unidentified terrorist group has just carried out a failed attempt on their lives, killing several people in the process.”

The assembly immediately exploded into a cacophony.

“This is scandalous!” a plump Lindblumese diplomat exclaimed. *“Why haven’t we been informed first?!”*

“Mr. Zorin, please calm down! The information is too recent!” the Dragonslayer answered, holding up the message. “This comes straight from North Gate!”

“Preposterous!” the Alexandrian ambassador retorted. “Queen Garnet and Regent Cid were supposed to arrive in Burmecia hours ago! How come we learn of this only now?!”

“Mr. Friedrich, I assure you I know as much about this incident as you do!”

“You better be telling the truth, Chancellor Fritjofsson!” Zorin hissed, threatening him with a finger.

Ulrich’s swift, cunning eyes scanned the multitude until they met Sir Wulfweard’s gaze. Both dragonslayers held each other’s stare for what felt to them like an eternity, and the old knight knew from that simple contact what his next move would be.

“Before we jump to conclusions, please let me tell you something, Mr. Zorin,” the chancellor said. “As you surely know, one of our military airships was bombed two days ago, resulting in the deaths of thirty-five Burmecian soldiers.”

“*Son of a bitch...*” Wulfweard thought, trembling with rage. Sigrunn shrank in her place, horrified by the consequences of her failure.

“... Do you believe both incidents are linked, Mr. Fritjoffson?” President Bishop intervened.

“Indeed,” Ulrich affirmed with rehearsed conviction. “We’re already working on finding these criminals, Your Excellencies, and you can rest assured; once we catch them, *justice will be done.*”

Sir Wulfweard lowered his head as applause rose from the crowd. Gunnar placed a hand on his shoulder and offered him an understanding look.

“Is your boy okay at least?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

“What..?”

“Stop playing dumb, Wulf. I’ve gathered enough evidence to summarily execute your student three times over,” the Jäger stated. “Don’t worry, though... I’m not here for her.”

“... You’re going to frame me for the attacks, aren’t you?” Wulfweard muttered, letting out a wry chuckle. “You used to be better than this.”

“Sacrifices must be made for peace,” the giant calmly stated as the ovation died down.

Ulrich carried on with his speech, but the two old wolves were too absorbed in their standoff to even care anymore. Eulogies were given, promises were made, and the Partisans only remembered about the

funeral when a group of clergymen set the pyre ablaze with blinding white fire, a sacred technique derived from the mighty Dragon's Crest.

"Farewell, dear friend..." Wulfweard thought as distant thunder improvised one final gun salute for the monarch.

"May the Allfather welcome him with open arms..." Gunnar prayed, much to Sigrunn's confusion. She didn't know what to make of him anymore.

Eventually, the flames died down and so did the ceremony. The storm coming from the east finally reached the Glade of Kings, and everyone but Wulfweard, Sigrunn and Gunnar hurriedly returned to the city. A hooded stateswoman passed the Partisans by as she left, unable to conceal the worried look on her face. They ignored her to avoid blowing her cover, but the Jäger with them immediately figured out what was happening.

"Herregud! Senator Astrid, Wulf?" Gunnar guffawed once he was sure they were alone. "Don't you think she's a little young for you?"

"What the hell are you talking about..?" the Partisan asked in disbelief.

“Cut the crap, pal, you’re just hurting my feelings now,” the Jäger pressed on with a knowing smirk. “I guess it’s safe to assume she’ll come back with reinforcements...”

“... So this is how we’re going to play, huh?” Wulfweard growled.

The giant’s smile deepened.

“Think of it as... *motivation*...” he answered. “Hey, kiddo.”

Sigrunn glared at him.

“There are four of my men waiting for you out there, one covering each exit,” he said. “Go west through the forest and stay away from the main road if you want to make it to the city in one piece.”

“Why are you telling me this..?” she asked, incredulous.

“Consider it as my parting gift to your master... for old times’ sake,” the Jäger replied. “However, put a single scratch on one of my boys, and I’ll tear you apart *limb from limb*. Understood?”

“What makes you think I’ll abandon my master?!” Sigrunn exclaimed, swiftly drawing her knives.

“Simple; if you keep testing my patience, I’ll make sure to capture you *alive*,” Gunnar stated in a disturbingly cheerful tone.

Her jaw shuddered at the implications, but she refused to let him shatter her resolve.

“Siggie...” Wulfweard said, interposing himself between the two warriors. “Do as he says.”

“B-But, master..!”

“*It’s an order, soldier!*” the old knight barked, making her recoil in shock.

“... Yes, sir.”

“Good girl...” Gunnar said. “Now leave. This is just between us...”

“... and it ends *now!*” Wulfweard snarled, baring his teeth like a beast.

Author’s note:

... *Aaand cue “I’m my own master now” from Metal Gear Rising! Gwahaha!*

Please don't kill me, I swear I'll stop with the cliffhangers once I have a little more free time to write... fucking December.

Anyway, hope you're having fun and don't hesitate to follow and/or review if you'd like to support my work, that sure helps me a lot :)

A special thanks to all my reviewers, followers, writer friends, and everyone who's still reading this. You're awesome, guys!

Stay tuned for more!

28. Bella Ciao

*Una mattina mi sono svegliato
o bella ciao, bella ciao,
bella ciao, ciao, ciao
una mattina mi son svegliato
ed ho trovato l'invasor...*

THWACK!

“Nrrrrgh!” Sir Wulfweard grunted, biting back a scream as Gunnar Ironhide slammed him into a tree, the sheer force of his punch splintering its bark.

“Oh, the memories!” the Jäger exclaimed, following up with two bone-crunching headbutts in quick succession. “C’mon, pal! This is getting boring!”

Hoisting the dragoon by the neck, he raised his fist for a fourth strike.

“Careful what you wish for!” Wulfweard shouted, breaking free from his grasp with a sharp blow to the elbow joint.

“Oof! You little piece of...!” the Jäger bellowed. A deadly right hook narrowly missed the Partisan’s face, who retaliated with a stomp to the side of Gunnar’s knee.

CRUNCH!

The giant howled in pain as he summoned the power of his Crest. Sir Wulfweard barely managed to roll out of the way before a stream of spiritual energy obliterated the area. The dust hadn’t even settled when three flying knives pierced the cloud, seeking Gunnar’s head; he smirked as he grabbed the hilt of his spiked bludgeon.

“You know what they say, Wulfie!” he shouted, deflecting the projectiles with a precise drawing strike. *“Don’t bring knives to a mace fight!”*

Something round and cold bopped Gunnar’s pinky toe, startling him.

“Son of a..!” he thought, realizing that Wulfweard had slipped a rolling grenade beneath his guard. Miliseconds before the bomb detonated, he

jumped as high as he could, soaring above the treetops to give himself a little thinking room.

“Gotcha!”

With a powerful jump, the Partisan burst out of the dust cloud, hurtling at break-neck speed toward the Jäger.

“Nice try...” Gunnar said, angling the hilt of his mace to parry Wulfweard’s twin daggers. Lightning punctuated the impact as the dragoons clashed mid-air, the storm serving as a backdrop for their final duel. *“... but you’re as predictable as ever!”*

With a quick flick of his wrist, the giant twisted his weapon to disarm him, using the opening to plant an armored elbow in his face.

CRACK!

“Rrgh!” Wulfweard uttered, blinded by the pain. The giant grabbed him by the collar and the next thing he knew he was plummeting head-first to the ground.

“Any last words?” the Jäger cackled, holding the Partisan in a bear hug to prevent him from breaking his fall. Wulfweard wiggled and struggled, trying in

vain to escape, but Gunnar's might was simply too much to handle.

"Guess... I have no choice," Wulfweard thought, closing his eyes to mould his spiritual energy into a spell. A shimmering coat of magic formed over his skin, and by the time the Jäger understood what was happening, it was already too late.

"White Draw..?! But how..!?"

"Mother Reis, hear my plea in this time of need!" the Partisan roared.

His aura exploded into a mass of glowing tendrils, piercing and burrowing into Gunnar's soul.

"Gwaaaaaaarggghh!" the Jäger howled as the miracle tore his spirit asunder, syphoning away his life force. Empowered by the stolen essence, Wulfweard broke free from his grasp and aimed an open palm at his face.

"This is for my students!" he roared, wreathing himself with the ghostly power of the Dragon's Crest.

"Show me what you've got!" the Jäger challenged him, adopting a defensive stance.

KRA-KOOOOM!

Night turned into day as the spell birthed an explosion that looked like a miniature star. It was so powerful that Sir Wulfweard got thrown across the graveyard, recovering just in time to land on a tall cypress branch.

“*Dammit... that was reckless...*” he thought as he dispelled his protective shroud. Fatigue threatened to overwhelm him in short order, so he needed to make every move count. “*Is it over...?*”

The sound of distant, slow clapping answered his question.

“Guess that’s a no...”

With a mighty jump, Gunnar emerged from the far side of the forest and landed in the middle of the glade, completely unscathed.

“*Jävla skit*, Wulf, I’m impressed!” he boomed. “I never thought you’d use pagan magic against your own kin!”

The Partisan chuckled.

“Cleyrans are also Burmecians, you know?” he retorted, coming to terms with the fact that both the fight *and his soul* were probably already lost.

“Spare me the lecture, you bleeding-heart son of a rat,” the giant riposted, spitting on the ground for emphasis. “Nice blast, by the way. You been hunting?”

“You know me, I need to keep myself busy,” the Partisan joked. “Your spirit armor is still as tough as ever.”

“Heh... gotta live up to my rep, buddy,” the Jäger replied.

A tense silence grew between them, only disturbed by the mournful droning of the rain.

“It doesn’t have to end like this, Gunnar...” Wulfweard said, fingers wrapped around the hilt of his last knife.

“We’ve known it would for a long time,” Gunnar answered, strenghtening his grip on his mace. “Don’t worry... I’ll grant you a true Burmecian’s death.”

Thunder rumbled above the field.

“Ready?”

“Let us settle this!”

As lightning set the skies ablaze, the warriors charged at each other, clashing in front of the pyre's ashen remains. Lighter and faster, the Partisan weaved, ducked and slipped through Gunnar's swings, looking for a chance to strike, but the Jäger had already figured him out and was fighting much more carefully.

"What's the matter, Wulfie? You look awfully tired!" the titan sneered, empowering himself with the Crest to hit harder and faster; he knew that Wulfweard lacked his vast collection of dragon souls, and thus couldn't beat him in a battle of endurance.

"He's right... I need to do something now!" the Partisan thought, barely keeping up with the Jäger's increased speed. Confident in his superiority, Gunnar raised his mace for an overhead smash and Wulfweard saw his chance to turn the tide of the battle.

"Now or never!"

The Crest on his shoulder glowed brightly as he dashed into grappling range; swift as a snake, the Partisan hooked Gunnar's arm mid-swing and stabbed him between the ribs.

SQUELCH!

“*Ngh... not bad...*” the Jäger grunted, grabbing the dragoon’s wrist before he could dislodge his blade. “*My turn!*”

CRUNCH!

Wulfweard screamed in agony as the giant crushed his bones into pulp.

“This is for all the people who died on that ship...” Gunnar snarled with a vicious grin. Suddenly his ears twitched, and he craned an alarmed look over his shoulder. “Hey Wulf! Someone’s come to see you!”

“Huh..?!”

“*Why don’t you go say hello!*” the titan roared, spinning violently to hurl his opponent at an incoming Sigrunn.

THUD!

“*Oof!*” the girl uttered as she caught Wulfweard in her arms, falling flat on her back.

“*Siggie! Are you okay?!*” the old knight desperately asked. “What the hell are you doing here?!”

“Pulling your tail out of the fire, what else?” she answered, coughing a little.

“*You’re unbelievable!*” he barked, beyond furious. “I agree to a hopeless duel to save your skin, and you casually decide to throw both our lives away!”

“Relax, it was hopeless until I arrived,” she quipped, jumping to her feet. “Can you still fight with that wrist?”

Sir Wulfweard sighed and stood up.

“I’ve won fights with both my legs broken.”

“Lindblum ’78! *That’s what I call a fucking classic!*” Gunnar chimed in, barely able to contain his rage. “*Too bad you won’t be around to hear the story!*”

The Jäger aimed his palm at the Partisans and a shrieking swarm of phantoms burst out of his Crest, so numerous that they looked like a ghostly meteor shower.

“Ready, kid?”

“Born ready!”

The two warriors fired their own dragon souls at the incoming specters, each collision resulting in a deafening blast.

“We’ve got ’em!”

“Siggie, watch out!”

Shielded by his magic, Gunnar leaped through the explosions, catching the Partisans off guard.

“*For Burmecia!*” he roared, knocking Wulfweard into a tree with a devastating swing of his mace.

“Master!” Sigrunn yelled, ducking to avoid a decapitating blow. A sweeping kick sought her legs, but she had already jumped out of reach.

“*Eat this!*” she yelled, landing a tornado kick on Wulfweard’s knife, driving it further into the Jäger’s torso.

“*Hhhrrrgggh!*” the giant grunted, powering through the agonizing pain to hook Sigrunn’s ankle, immobilizing her.

“*Oh shit...*” she said, preemptively activating her soul armor.

“Oh shit, indeed!” Gunnar exclaimed, hoisting her by the leg and slamming her, face-first into the

ground.

CRACK!

“Uwaaargh!”

“You like that, bitch? Try another one!”

CRACK!

“P-please..!”

“Gwahahahaha!”

CRACK!

Sigrunn coughed and gasped for air, her sight obscured by her bloodied bangs. Exhausted by the effort and his increasingly painful wound, the Jäger finally let her fall to the ground.

“*Whew...* I must admit you’re harder to kill than I expected...” he panted, raising his mace for the finishing blow. “May the Allfather have mercy upon your soul.”

WHAM!

“*Ngh!* What the..?!” the giant uttered, finding himself tackled off his feet by a badly injured Wulfweard.

“Mother Reis, hear my plea in this time of need!”
the Partisan shouted, brimming with spiritual energy.

The dragoons rolled and tumbled, engaging in a final grappling contest; *Gunnar’s overwhelming power versus Wulfweard’s soul stealing magic.*

“Graaaaaagh!” the giant roared, wiggling out of a joint lock and raising his fist for an overhead smash.

BLAM!

“YOU”

BLAM!

“CAN’T”

BLAM!

“BEAT ME”

BLAM!

“WULFWEARD!”

As his fist plunged for another strike, the Partisan caught his wrist with his good hand.

“Why won’t you die?!” the Jäger howled in frustration.

“Wrong...” his opponent answered through gritted teeth, smiling at him as his aura changed from a greenish white to crimson. “You and I... *are already dead!*”

“W-what..?!”

“*Here’s to you, Frigg...*” Wulfweard whispered as he closed his eyes, serenely embracing Death. Both dragoons began fading away from existence, consumed by the Partisan’s last spell.

“N-no..! What is this..?!” Gunnar panicked, struggling in vain to free himself as his body turned into ghostly cherry blossoms. “No! Let me go! Not like this! *Aaaaaaargh!*”

His voice dissipated along with their bodies, scattered in the wind as flower petals.

“*Master!*” Sigrunn shrieked, powerlessly reaching out for him as he departed on his final journey.

Silence.

The rain seemed to pound on her very soul, cold, uncaring, merciless. She rolled onto her back and lay still, contemplating the moonless sky.

Thunder rumbled above the glade, mourning the end of an age.

“Why..?” she stammered, no longer able to tell between her blood, her tears and the *godawful rain* that kept pummeling her flesh. “Why, why, why? Why?!”

He was gone, and it was her fault.

She uttered a long, broken wail until her throat ached as much as her heart, and when she felt all hope was lost something *snapped* within her, flooding every last fiber of her being with boiling, raw, unlimited *power*.

“What... **is this..?**” she stammered in an increasingly distorted voice, watching her arm leave behind a hazy afterimage as she waved it around. “**Huh..?**”

The sound of approaching footsteps alerted her to the arrival of Gunnar’s squad.

“*Shit! What do I do? What do I do?!*” she thought, desperately dragging herself backward toward the forest.

Eerie, cacophonous laughter rose from the darkest pits of her mind, terrifying her on a primal level.

Something, a presence, began encroaching upon her soul, sapping her will and driving her sanity into a corner.

“W-who are you..?” she mumbled, unable to resist the call of madness.

“***I am you and you are me...***” the voice hissed, and the world faded to black.

March 31st, 1820, Alexandria Castle.

11:30

Having spent most of her life in the military (not to mention her stint as a farmer), Freya had become quite the early bird. That day, however, she awoke almost at noon, feeling unexpectedly refreshed. Lazily, she sat up in her bed, stretched out, and uttered a big, undignified yawn.

“Oh granny, what big teeth you’ve got!”

She gasped and choked on her own saliva, caught completely off guard. *She hated getting interrupted like that.*

“Hi, Eiko...” the Burmecian wheezed between coughs. “I hadn’t noticed you there...”

The summoner got up from her chair and poured her a glass of water.

“Whoa, don’t die on me, girlfriend!” she joked. “How you feelin’ today?”

The dragoon drank avidly, hiccuped and raised a clawed thumb.

“Seriously though, I can’t believe how fast you and Garnet have recovered,” Eiko said, patting her on the back. “I mean, you two got *butchered* out there, for lack of a fancier word...”

“Now that you mention it, where’s Garnet?” Freya asked, realizing that the queen’s bed was empty.

“She’s already back to work! Can you believe that? Woman must be made of *mythril* or something!”

“*Classic Garnet...*” the dragoon thought, a knowing smirk on her lips. “Oh, Eiko, I wanted to apologize for my rudeness last night...”

“Huh..? Whaddya mean?”

A pair of regretful jade eyes met her gaze, veiled by a mop of unkempt silver hair.

“Well... with all that’s gone on, I forgot to thank you for everything you’ve done.”

The princess blinked dumbly at her.

“Oooh! You’re talking ’bout last week!” she piped up, awkwardly scratching the back of her head. “It’s no big deal, really. We do that all the time with the squad.”

“Of course it’s important!” Freya exclaimed. “I... I wish I could have apologized at least for what I did.”

“It wasn’t your fault, sis. We both know Trance can be a *nasty* bitch,” Eiko reassured her. “What the hell happened, though? I mean, you don’t need to answer if it makes you uncomfortable, but *man!* I hadn’t seen anyone go feral like that since the Treno Rebellion!”

The dragon knight averted her eyes, ashamed by the episode.

“... After Ulrich nearly killed me, I fled Burmecia with Fratley’s help. I was so mad at him for not believing me about the assassination plot

until it was too late... I guess I still am..." she said, fidgeting with her scorched wedding band. "... but I'm also glad he made it to a safe place."

"I warned you the man was a moron..." the summoner huffed, folding her arms. "Any idea where he might be now?"

"Well... we parted ways once we reached the Melda Arch. Sir Wulfweard told me that he wrote him from Dali."

"Did he fucking *ditch* you there? What a douche!" Eiko squawked. "How come you ended up at that alley, anyway? It's like, fifteen minutes from the station."

Freya sighed, haunted by guilt.

"I made a mistake..." she said, almost in a whisper. "Part of the docks were still being repaired because of the earthquakes, so my flight was delayed. I was alone, anxious and I didn't feel safe waiting there, so I decided to... um..."

"... Hit town and get shitfaced," the summoner finished her sentence, rubbing the space between her eyebrows. "Woman, we need to talk about that drinking problem of yours one of these days."

“Hey! For your information, I’ve been sober for almost a *wee*-!” the knight retorted, but then she remembered Garnet’s party. “Nevermind...”

“Zidane told me you were ambushed by a bunch of freaking *dragoons*!” Eiko rerailed the conversation. “I can’t believe they would attack *you*, the pride of their regiment!”

“Well, I *did* fight Ulrich in front of several witnesses, so it’s small wonder I got branded a traitor,” Freya conceded. “I mean, I didn’t duel him in public... I just didn’t expect *a scholar* to punch me through a wall.”

“Wait, are you telling me the guys at North Gate let *two* wanted criminals through, no questions asked?”

“Of course not! We were trained by a former Jäger, so we know our way around border controls.”

“Ooo... *kay*?” Eiko said, making a mental note to never mess with Freya. Or Jägers. Or Burmecians in general.

“The thing is, I hadn’t fully recovered yet from that fight and there were too many civilians around to use my spells, so I got overwhelmed, kicked out of the pub and... *hanged from a lamp post*,” the

dragoon enumerated, much to the summoner's horror. "The next thing I remember is waking up here, in the castle."

"Holy shit, Freya... *are you okay?*" Eiko asked, worriedly stroking the Burmecian's cheek. "I can't... I just... sorry, this was a mistake..."

"It's all in the past now, don't worry," Freya answered, gently cupping her hand. "Besides, it's been an awfully long time since our last reunion. I missed you all."

The princess snorted.

"That's *the* most Zidane-ish thing I've ever heard you say," she joked, earning herself an annoyed glare from her friend. "Don't get me wrong, I ain't bitching! It's just... it's really nice to see you smile again, buddy."

Freya blushed slightly at the statement, but remained dignified enough not to let the summoner notice.

"Thanks... guess I've learned to appreciate the simple things," she said. "Growing old has its advantages."

“Hah! Speaking of appreciation, I have a little surprise for you, granny!” the princess exclaimed. “Hey, Dionne! Would you please let ’em in?”

The door creaked open and two Burmecian men entered the room, followed by Eiko’s trusty bodyguard and a young demi-rodent girl.

“Sir Osbern! I’m glad to see you in good health!” Freya greeted him.

“Good afternoon, Lady Crescent,” the war veteran answered, courteously nodding his head. “How are you feeling today?”

“Better than I should, all things considered,” she quipped. “What about your men? Has your friend recovered from his wounds?”

“He’s just like new and it’s all thanks to Her Highness, the Princess of Lindblum,” he solemnly answered.

“Just call me Eiko, pal,” the summoner said, awkwardly scratching the back of her head. “Oh, right! Freya, they’re here to wish you a quick recovery in the name of the Burmecian-Alexandrian community.”

“... And to thank you for risking your life to protect us,” the second man added in such a grateful tone that Freya was almost moved to tears. He was covered in bandages and had a lonely, melancholic voice. “Ari, what are you doing back there? Didn’t you want to meet your hero?”

The little girl shyly peeked at Freya from behind Major Dionne. “*H-hello...*” she stuttered, trembling uncontrollably from head to toe.

“*D’aww! Ain’t you a cutie pie!*” Eiko piped up, waving her closer. “*C’mere! Don’t be shy!*”

Blushing furiously under her fur, Ari walked up to the bed, hiding something behind her back.

“Hi there, Ari!” Freya greeted her with a warm smile, and it was enough to send her running back to her father. Everyone in the room shared a hearty laugh as she pressed her face against his thigh, utterly embarrassed.

“She’s my only daughter, Lady Crescent,” the man explained, stroking the girl’s hair. “Those... *monsters* took her hostage along with one of her friends and... *strapped her to a bomb...*”

Silence overtook the room as he started crying.

“... I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t reached her in time,” he sobbed, kneeling to hug his daughter. “*Thank you. Thank you so much.*”

“... Actually, I couldn’t even *reach* the tower, good man,” Freya stated, humbly lowering her eyes. “You should thank Sir Osbern, not me.”

“Nonsense. We wouldn’t have gotten past those flying creatures without you, ma’am,” the veteran reassured her. “Besides, your bravery in battle allowed us to break through the enemy’s defenses.”

“A.K.A, stop putting yourself down, woman, *geez...*” the summoner translated. “Oh! Are those peonies in your hand, Ari? I freaking *love* peonies!”

The child flinched, realizing that she had accidentally revealed her surprise gift.

“Y-yes, Your Highness...” she stammered, nervously approaching Freya and extending her the small bouquet and a get-well card. “T-these are for you, Lady C-Crescent!”

“They’re gorgeous! Thank you!” the dragoon answered, breathing in the scent of the flowers. She then opened the card and read it, a bright grin on her face. “Did you write this, Ari?”

“M-my dad and the neighbors helped me, b-but yeah...”

“Oh, there’s a drawing! So you’re an artist!” Freya chuckled, finding a crude, yet lovingly drawn picture of herself leading a group of Burmecians into battle.

“T-thanks! This is you, *with a flaming spear!*” she exclaimed, delighted by the compliment. “This is my dad, here’s Mr. Osbern, the neighbors...”

“I assume this girl is you, am I right?”

“Yeah! And this boy is...” she said, but the sudden lump in her throat prevented her from completing the sentence. “*This boy is...*”

Her eyes began watering up.

“He’s your friend... isn’t he?” Freya asked.

Unable to stop herself from crying, Ari nodded her head.

“Little Soren is still missing, along with the rest of his family,” Sir Osbern somberly stated. “We’re still looking for them, but the circumstances of their disappearance are... *strange.*”

“Come here, Ari,” Freya invited her, patting the mattress. Hesitatingly, the girl climbed onto the bed and the knight held her until she calmed down a little.

“*He* took him...” the child suddenly hiccuped.

“What did you say?”

“*Horik the White*. He took him, *I’m sure...*”

The dragoon stared blankly at her for a moment.

“What..? But that’s impossible..! Horik is...”

“... dead?” Ari’s father said, folding his arms. “I thought the same at first, but my daughter is an enthusiast of Burmecia’s military history, and her description of this man is *chillingly* accurate.”

“Let’s not forget he used to be a Jäger...” Sir Osbern added. “Maybe he faked his own death to go rogue. The question is: *why would he abduct them?*”

Freya closed her eyes. She had come to believe the albino manhunter was only a bad memory by then, but there he was, intruding in her life once again.

“We’ll find them. *I promise,*” she whispered in Ari’s ear.

“Um... sorry for interrupting...” a bald Pluto Knight said, bumbling awkwardly into the room. “Lady Crescent, there’s a Burmecian nobleman at the gate asking for a meeting with you. He claims to be an old friend of yours, but he doesn’t look old enough for... *wait*, let me rephrase that...”

“Please, *don’t*,” the dragoon deadpanned. “Did he tell you his name?”

“Crap... what was he called again? Sigmund..? No... Wilfred, perhaps?”

“*Sigfred..?*” Freya muttered, wondering what was an idle snob like him doing in the middle of a warzone.

Author’s note:

There goes the last chapter of the year!

TLCB is celebrating its first anniversary! A lot has happened since Freya showed up in Alexandria and it’s all thanks to you, guys! I would have never made it this far without your support, so I wanted to *thank you* for this wonderful adventure!

See you on the next chapter: “The Last Cherry Blossom”

Jota Te.

29. The Last Cherry Blossom

Freya stormed into her bedroom, slammed the door behind her and leaned on it for support.

“Why..?”

She let herself slide down slowly until she was sitting on the ground and covered her mouth so nobody would hear her sob.

Gentle sunlight seeped through the curtains, warming her skin and reflecting off the motes that wafted through the air. Admiring the quiet beauty of the scene only made her more miserable; Sir Wulfweard would often find poetry in the simplest things.

“I’m sorry for your loss...”

A little startled, yet unsurprised by his timing, Freya leveled an angry scowl at the phantom that had just materialized in the room.

“Lord Gizamaluke, I presume?” she asked.

The apparition smirked.

“Time hasn’t dulled your wit, Lady Freya.”

“It doesn’t take a bright intellect to understand why you’re here,” the knight retorted.

“Oh, really?” the god said. “Don’t you think you’re... *jumping* to conclusions a little too soon?”

Freya groaned in exasperation, letting her head bang listlessly against the door. “If you’re going to mock me in my darkest hour, at least have the decency to do it properly...”

“What if I told you instead that I can make the pain go away?”

The dragoon languidly opened her eyes and raised an eyebrow at his statement.

“... At the cost of my soul, right?”

Gizamaluke folded his arms.

“Not at all, but if you’re planning on selling it, you should do it while it’s still yours.”

“*Is that a threat?*” Freya riposted through gritted teeth.

“No... I’m just stating a fact,” the ghost answered. “If you don’t believe me, just take a look at yourself.”

Reluctantly, the Burmecian obliged.

“*What the..?*” she muttered, realizing that the first symptoms of Trance had already manifested without her noticing.

“Your threshold has been lowering with each transformation, right?” Gizamaluke said. “And not only that; you’ve become so unstable that you can’t even *experience* sorrow without risking an outburst.”

“Okay, how do you know about this? Are you spying on me?” Freya brusquely asked. “Just tell me what you want already!”

“I seek to make amends for my father’s crimes,” the god declared. “His madness has already caused too much damage...”

“Oh, really? I hadn’t noticed.”

“I know you don’t trust me, but you and your friend, Zidane, are in great danger...” he said, earning himself a blazing glare from the dragon knight. “I can treat you, purge the taint from your souls before it’s too late...”

“Don’t you dare pull him into your schemes!” she cut him off, rising to her feet as a surge of wild

energy flooded her system.

CRASH!

Gizamaluke blinked, perplexed; Freya had intentionally missed his head by *inches* with a spirit javelin, shattering the balcony window next to him into pieces.

“Stay. Away. From my friends,” she hissed, breathing heavily as the monster within her gained purchase. Debilitated by its growing influence, she lost her footing and banged her head against the door. She gritted her teeth and pulled her ears down as visions of everything she had lost relentlessly assaulted her mind.

“Freya, listen to me; the Beast is using your memories against yourself. What you’re seeing is not real,” Gizamaluke said, kneeling beside her. “Take deep, slow breaths, like this...”

Cornered, out of options, the dragoon grudgingly followed his instructions. Much to her surprise, the insidious whispering in her head relented considerably.

“Good, very good, now look around the room and describe an object you like. It can be anything.”

“What..?”

“Trust me; as silly as it sounds, keeping your mind grounded on reality will help you ride out the attack,” the ghost explained. “What about that picture? Can you describe it to me?”

Panting and sweating profusely, Freya craned a look at the oil painting on the wall.

“A city at night...” she wheezed.

“Can you elaborate a little further?”

She angled an annoyed glare at the ghost and went back to contemplating the illustration.

“A bustling town... under a sea of shimmering stars...” she said with mock solemnity. “They look like diamonds... strewn across black velvet... *are you satisfied now?*”

Gizamaluke chuckled at her irreverence.

“Such a strong spirit... no wonder you’ve survived this long,” he commented. “Are you feeling better now?”

“Barely... but at least the visions are gone...” she mumbled. “I don’t get it... what was that? how did you know it would work?”

“Wandering adrift in the realm of the dead taught me many things about the inner workings of the soul,” he explained, rising to his feet. Freya averted her eyes, remembering their tragic encounter at his temple.

“Sorry for that...”

“What are you talking about? *You saved me* back then,” he said as he walked toward the balcony. “Your intervention granted me the freedom I needed to follow my own path.”

“Glad to hear that...” she commented, feebly straightening her back. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Two.”

“How do you intend to clean up your father’s mess?”

“This is not a safe place to discuss that,” the god answered. “However, if you really want to know, we can talk about it once we flush that parasite out of your spirit.”

“So you *do* want my help...”

“Only if you’re interested.”

“But why *me*?” the knight asked, using the door frame for support as she stood up. “Just take a good look at what I have become!”

Gizamaluke smiled.

“What I see is a strong, resolute woman who has remained true to herself in the face of overwhelming adversity,” he answered as he placed his hand over the fractured window. “I’m not looking for a servant or a thrall, but for a *righteous champion* who will do the right thing no matter what.”

A faint glow radiated from his fingertips, seeping through the cracks in the glass like quicksilver.

“Then you’re wasting your time here,” Freya retorted. “I’ve hurt plenty of people... taken more lives than I dare to count. You’re looking for an ideal hero, and I’m just a washed-out killer.”

“My dear, you *really* shouldn’t ignore Fridgeir’s advice like that...” Gizamaluke answered, craning a knowing look at her over his shoulder.

A lump formed in Freya’s throat as Gizamaluke’s ghostly form started dissipating like a dream.

“W-What did you just say..?” she stammered, suddenly feeling light-headed.

“I have unlocked my father’s reliquary for you,” he answered. “Open it and follow the obsidian star to my domain. There you’ll find the answers you seek.”

“Wait... *wait!*” she yelled, but he was already gone. “*Dammit!*”

She pounded the wall and sat on the floor, utterly frustrated. It took her a while to notice that the broken window had been restored to pristine condition.

Knock, knock, knock!

“Freya? Are you in there?” Mikoto asked from the hallway. She sounded so worried and scared that the dragoon got up as fast as she could and let her into the room.

“Mikoto! What’s wrong?” the knight asked.

“*He’s out of control!*” the genome exclaimed.

“Drat... the barrier won’t contain him much longer...” Steiner spat.

An inhuman roar echoed across the prison tower.

“I’ve never seen him *this* pissed before...” Eiko said, gripping her catalyst flute like a lifeline. “Any ideas?”

Consumed by his Trance, Zidane savagely pounded on the door of his cell, the ground quaking with each impact.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

“*This is my fault...*” Garnet mumbled, trembling from head to toe.

A particularly brutal strike fractured the stone around the door frame, startling everyone.

“My Queen, Princess! This place isn’t safe anymore!” the Pluto Knight exclaimed, drawing his broadsword.

“The fuck are you implying, Steiner?!” Eiko squawked. “I ain’t going anywhere!”

BLAM!

“Guys! I’ve found her!” Mikoto shouted, climbing the spiral staircase with Freya in tow.

“What’s going on?!” the Burmecian asked, alarmed by the racket.

“Freya... it’s Zidane!” Garnet exclaimed. “He flew into a rage over a casualty report and locked himself in there!”

BLAM!

“*Holy shi-!*” Eiko squeaked as the frenzied genome punched a gaping hole in the door, destroying the magical glyph that kept it sealed. “Freya, if you know how to stop him, now would be a great time to tell us!”

“*It’s just as Gizamaluke mentioned..!*” the dragoon thought. She took a deep breath and stared into Zidane’s blazing eyes. “Hey, Monkey Tail! It’s me, Rat Face!”

“We’ve already tried talking to him!” Garnet said. “He just won’t listen!”

“Do you think we can subdue him if we work together?” Freya proposed.

“Um... I don’t mean to rain on your parade, darling, but he’s just dispelled a seal designed to contain *Eidolons* with his fucking *fists!*” Eiko exclaimed.

“What about Beatrix? Where is she?” the dragoon asked.

Both summoners cringed *hard* at the mention of the general.

“Too late! Here he comes!” Mikoto yelled.

CRACK!

With a final, decisive blow, Zidane ripped the door from its hinges and charged at his friends.

“Your Majesty! Please, calm do-!” Steiner pleaded, only to get savagely punched across the room. He crashed into a column and fell limply to the floor, bleeding profusely from the mouth.

“*Adelbert!*” Garnet shrieked, rushing to his side. The yelling attracted her husband’s attention, and he lunged at her with a nightmarish grin on his face.

“*That’s enough!*” Freya barked, knocking him off-course with a tackle. Zidane flashed her a ferocious glare, and it was at that moment that she knew she was *done for*.

“*Nononono!*” Eiko thought, readying a Protect spell as fast as she could.

Without missing a beat, Zidane grabbed the Burmecian by the collar and smashed her into a wall, but Eiko’s timely enchantment absorbed most of the impact, saving her life.

“*Zidane...*” Freya croaked as the genome hoisted her into the air by the neck. “*Don’t let it... control you..!*”

“**There’s no us anymore,**” he answered in a terrifying voice, creating a swirling sphere of annihilation magic with his other hand. “... **ONLY ME!**”

“*Brother, no!*”

Zidane tried to blast her with his spell, only to discover that Mikoto was restraining his arm with her psychokinesis.

“Please...” she begged, barely holding onto consciousness due to the tremendous strain the technique was putting on her brain.

“**OUT OF MY WAY!**” the king bellowed as he violently ripped his arm free, causing his sister to faint and hit her head on the floor.

“Miko!” Eiko shrieked, rushing to get her out of the killzone.

Time seemed to freeze for Garnet; one moment she was dancing and partying with her family and friends, the next she was healing a fatally wounded Steiner, covered in scars, racing to avert yet another

world war and the love of her life was trying to kill everyone she knew.

“Zidane, put Freya down!” she shouted as she molded her magic into the darkest curse she knew, but he ignored her. “I SAID *PUT HER DOWN!*”

FLASH!

The genome howled in agony as Garnet’s spell robbed him of his eyesight, forcing him to experience an unspeakable pain. The summoner covered her mouth and teared up, horrified by her own outburst.

“Sorry for this...” Freya muttered, breaking free of Zidane’s grasp with a sharp blow to his elbow joint.

TWHACK!

Blinded and screaming with rage, the possessed king launched a killer haymaker at where he expected the Burmecian’s head to be, but his fist only succeeded in getting stuck in the wall.

“***WHERE ARE YOU?!***” he roared, pulling his hand out of the brickwork along with a generous serving of rubble.

CRACK!

“UWAAAARGHHH!” Zidane screamed; Freya had crippled his leg with a kick to the side of the knee. Both summoners cringed and looked away, unable to stomach the situation.

“Help me!” Freya yelled, tackling the genome to the ground and putting him in a precarious submission hold.

“Y-Yes! Sorry!” Eiko stuttered, enhancing the Burmecian’s strength with a Might spell. Steiner tried to get up and join the brawl but Garnet stopped him before he did something stupid.

“Rest yourself Adelbert, we’ve got this,” Garnet said, helping the knight to a sitting position and leaning him against the column. She then ran up to her husband, knelt beside him and gently held his face in her hands. “Honey, it’s me, Dagger...”

“RAAAGH, LET ME GO!” he bellowed, nearly biting off her fingers.

“Try something else... jog his memory!” Freya exclaimed.

“Ah... um...” Garnet hesitated, thinking as fast as she could. The solution came to her in the form of a long-forgotten song.

“Can’t hold him any longer!” the Burmecian desperately yelled.

The queen cleared her throat.

“Alone for a while I’ve been searching through the dark...”

“Huh..?”

“For traces of the love you left inside my lonely heart...”

“What the..?” Freya uttered, realizing that the king had suddenly become *much* more docile. “Garnet, it’s working! Keep that up!”

“To weave by picking up the pieces that remain...”

“Melodies... of life...” Zidane feebly sang along. *“Love’s... lost refrain...”*

“You remembered!”

“Garnet..?” he said before getting assaulted by the visions all over again. **“Please... kill me... before I... rgggh!”**

“No! We’ll make it out of this together, you hear me?!” the dragon knight barked. “Now do as I say;

take a slow, deep breath!”

“I... can’t...”

“You’ve slain dragons with your freaking hands! *Of course you can!*” she countered, trying her hardest to keep him pinned. “Do it for Garnet! *Do it for your son!*”

Trembling in excruciating pain, the genome focused on his love for his family and regained enough self-control to follow Freya’s orders.

“Excellent! Now exhale!”

Zidane let out a long, quivering exhalation.

“Good, good! Again!”

The queen watched them in awe; with each repetition, her husband’s aura decreased in intensity, making it almost bearable to be near him.

“Um... I’m going to ask you something a little strange now...” Freya improvised, realizing that Gizamaluke’s method had to be adapted to Zidane’s... *new circumstances*. “Describe Garnet’s perfume... what is it made of?”

“The hell, Freya..?”

“Trust me, this will help you,” the Burmecian answered, and then she added in an audacious tone: “Besides, this should be easy for someone with your... *talents*...”

Garnet blushed and averted her eyes, not too keen on remembering *that* aspect of her husband’s past.

“... I hate you...” Zidane grumbled under his breath and then caught a whiff of the queen’s scent. “Red roses... lemon... honeycomb, too...”

“Honeycomb? I knew there was nectar involved but hot damn, Tribal! I’m impressed!” Freya exclaimed, cautiously loosening her grip on his arm.

“Told you... *babe connoisseur*,” the genome mumbled, punctuating his boast with a smirk. “... Made you say *damn*...”

Freya blinked twice and laughed.

“I guess you did,” she conceded. “Welcome back, old friend.”

“We’re... not that old...” he mumbled as he succumbed to exhaustion. “I’m... *so sorry*...”

“It’s okay...” Garnet whispered, stroking his hair until he fell asleep. “I’m sorry too.”

It was almost evening when Garnet finally found Freya. She was sitting on the grass under a lone cherry tree, in the exact same spot where Sir Wulfweard had entrusted her with the fate of her kingdom. Everything around her was in ruins, ravaged by Zidane during the invasion. Alexandria's golden outline gleamed in the distance, illuminated by the last rays of a dying sun.

“May I?”

The knight nodded, and the queen sat next to her.

“How are they?”

“Miko's fine, Zid alternates between bouts of consciousness and feverish nightmares, and we've managed to stabilize Adelbert... that blow nearly cut him in half,” she said, and then she produced a small, silver flask. “... Want some?”

“... That's no rose tea, isn't it?” Freya joked.

“Blank's wedding gift,” the summoner stated, handing her the canteen. “It ages surprisingly well, so I've been saving it for a... *special occasion*.”

The dragoon smirked, took a long swig and returned the flask to its owner.

“Oooh... that sure hit the spot...” she said, shuddering a little. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome...” Garnet answered. Emboldened by Freya’s reaction, she tried to imitate her, only to end up burning her throat with the first sip. “Ramuh’s beard! This is even stronger than I remembered...”

“If you plan to start drinking, bandit-brewed moonshine isn’t the wisest of choices,” her friend quipped.

The summoner chuckled a little and then let out a long, utterly disheartened sigh.

“I’m sorry about your teacher... he was a good man.”

Freya hugged her knees and gazed absently at the horizon for a while.

“... Wulfweard and Fratley were the closest thing I had to a family,” she said, almost in a whisper. “I thought I already knew how it felt to lose it all... *boy, was I wrong.*”

Garnet lowered her eyes and softly rested her head on the dragoon’s shoulder.

“You know... even if we haven’t seen each other that much lately, Zid, Li’l Tot and I have always considered you part of our family,” she said, capturing the knight’s attention. “... I can’t give you back what you lost, but I can promise you one thing; as long as one of us still breathes, you’ll always have a place to call home.”

Freya closed her eyes and choked back a sob.

“Thank you... you have no... *thank you*,” she stammered, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. “I’m... I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“What..?”

The Burmecian showed her a flat, round obsidian shard encased in a golden frame. It was thin enough to be translucent and fit snugly in the palm of her hand.

“Is that..?”

“Yes...”

“May I?”

“M-hm.”

The summoner took the jewel and flipped it around, looking for signs of its purpose. It was

positively *ancient* and radiated a faint, yet ominous aura.

“Strange... I was expecting some sort of summoning gem,” she said. “How does it work?”

“It’s a magical lens, capable of revealing the invisible,” Freya explained. “Hold it in front of you and look at the sky, right where I’m pointing.”

Garnet followed her instructions and soon she found herself staring at something that defied all logic.

“A phantom star...”

“It marks the path to Gizamaluke’s realm,” the knight explained.

“May I ask you *why*, Freya?” the queen said, lowering the artifact. “I thought you didn’t trust him.”

“I don’t... but he appeared to me today, taught me what you saw on that tower,” she answered. “He claimed to know the truth about Trance... and how to cure it.”

“Of course he did...” the summoner sighed, fidgeting with the relic.

“Listen, I *really* don’t want to do this, but my... *condition* keeps worsening by the day,” Freya stated. “I’ve already hurt innocent people... I can’t allow that to happen again.”

“I understand...” the queen muttered. “... Did he mention wanting something in return?”

“No...” the knight said, much to Garnet’s disbelief. “I mean, it’s obvious he has ulterior motives, but he promised to help me regardless of what I do afterwards.”

“No strings attached? Yeah, sure,” the summoner ironized. “Nobody does that for free, least of all a fallen god with an agenda.”

“There’s more...” Freya added, choosing her next words as carefully as she could. “He warned me moments before the... *incident* that Zidane needed immediate treatment. If what Gizamaluke says is true, and I’m starting to believe *it is*, then this time we might lose him for good.”

A violent shiver ran down Garnet’s spine.

“Wait... are you implying you want to take the king of Alexandria, *my husband*, on a road trip to some alien place controlled by a wild card god *whom you’ve already **killed** once* just because he

taught you *breathing techniques*? *In the middle of a world war*, no less?”

“... Would you prefer to stand by and watch him become an animal?”

The summoner stood up, fists clenched.

“I... I need to think...” she stammered, feeling utterly powerless.

The knight lowered her eyes and nodded. Garnet turned back and started walking downhill, but stopped once she realized the true extent of the damage done to the Burmecian garden; *Freya’s tree was literally the last one standing*.

“... I’ll provide you with the means to reach your destination,” the queen promised, giving her friend one last look. “But please... give me time to try and talk with Zid about this.”

30. Firewall

April 2nd, 1820, Alexandria Castle.

04:15

The Royal hangar's gate rumbled open, allowing Mikoto's airship, the Gaia One, to enter the runway. A thick blanket of fog engulfed the region, severely restricting visibility; perfect for sneaking out of the city... or for an ambush.

An armored container, pulled by one of Cid's steam machines, was discretely loaded onto the ship under Garnet's disheartened supervision.

"It's for his own good," Cid said, patting his adoptive niece's shoulder with a wrinkled hand.

"I know... it's just... *horrible*," she muttered, touching the cage one last time before it disappeared into the cargo bay. "*See you soon, my love...*"

"Cheer up, babe, the cavalry's here," a familiar, snarky voice declared.

“Could you show a minimum of respect, bro?” a deeper, raspier voice said.

“Blank! Marcus!” Garnet exclaimed, surprised to meet what remained of the old Tantalus crew. “It’s good to see you!”

“Hey, what about me?!” Cinna squawked, his knees trembling under the weight of a small mountain of luggage.

“Tee-hee... I’m glad to see you too, Cinna,” the summoner added. “What are you doing here? I thought you were working undercover in Treno!”

“What can I say?” Marcus replied, folding his muscular arms. “Mess with one of us, and you mess with the whole gang.”

“Don’t fret, Dag, we’ll bring Casanova back in one piece,” Blank promised.

“... Or two, tops,” Cinna joked.

“See?” Cid said, smirking under his silver mustache. “They are in the best of hands!”

With Major Dionne by her side, Eiko approached the group, a pilot helmet under her arm.

“What are you guys doing here?” she squawked. “Go help Miko secure that container in place! It’s past time we left!”

“Aye aye, captain!” the trio cheekily replied, saluting her à la Tantalus before scuttling away.

“I swear they get lazier by the minute...” Eiko commented once they were out of earshot. “... ’sup, Dag? Dad.”

“Are your preparations complete, *Birdie*?” Cid asked, much to Garnet’s amusement; he had given her that nickname because of her passion for aviation, but she had never been too keen on being called that. At least not in front of others.

“*Daaad*, you’re embarrassing me!” the princess jokingly whined. “... And *yeah*, we’re ready to kick some ass if push comes to shove.”

“Remember, the *Madeen* is *not* a battleship. Try to remain...”

“... beneath notice, got it.”

The old regent smiled a tired, wrinkly smile at his rambunctious daughter.

“Hey... I’m proud of you,” he said.

“*Thanks, dad...*” Eiko purred, briefly dropping the act to give him a heartfelt hug. “Sorry for running away...”

“*What..?*” Garnet reacted, blinking stupidly at the duo. Cid uttered an exasperated, yet subtly proud chuckle.

“When we lost contact with Alexandria the other day, I told her to stay at home until I found out what had happened,” Cid explained.

“... *Aaaand* I may have freaked out *a little*, stolen the Madeen and crossed the Alexandrian border illegally,” Eiko completed the story. “But hey... all’s well that ends well, *right?*”

The queen snorted.

“In any case, I’m glad you decided to be yourself,” she answered.

“Yeah, me too,” the princess added. “Oh, look who’s finally fallen off her bed!”

Sporting a gleaming suit of armor, Freya walked up to them, a brand-new javelin resting on her shoulder and carrying an old travel backpack that had certainly seen better days.

“*Daaamn*, looking sharp, babe!” Eiko greeted her.

“Heh... thanks,” the dragoon awkwardly answered.

“Pure mythrill, orichalcum-plated for maximum magic deflection,” Garnet proudly stated. “... An armor fit only for a queen.”

“Wait... isn’t it..?” Cid muttered, utterly baffled.

“... A priceless national treasure and a political scandal begging to happen?” the summoner enumerated. “You bet.”

“Garnet... are you sure about this..?” Freya asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “I mean, I can make do with my old armor if that saves you a headache...”

“A few days ago you gave me something precious to you that wound up saving my life,” the queen replied, drawing Frigg’s pendant out of her bosom and returning it to its rightful owner. “Believe me; I’d give you my crown if that could guarantee your safety.”

Freya’s lower lip quivered a little as she put on her mother’s necklace.

“... I’ll bring him back to you safe and sound,” she swore, offering her friend a knightly nod.

“I know you will,” Garnet stated, resting a hand on the dragoon’s shoulder. “Now go, Freya of Burmecia... *let the gods know who you are!*”

The Gaia One’s flight deck roared to life with a glorious symphony of whirrs and buzzes as Mikoto frantically flipped switches and pushed buttons all over the place.

“Where were you? We need to reach the sea before the sun rises!” the genome exclaimed without even turning her head as she prepared for takeoff.

“Sorry, I was experimenting with a new look,” Freya joked, taking the copilot’s seat. The genome stole an intrigued glance at her armor and cocked an eyebrow.

“... Isn’t that supposed to be in a museum?”

“Yes.”

“... Guess that being besties with a queen has its benefits.”

“Indeed.”

“Tantalus! Status report!” Mikoto ordered over the PA system.

“Container secured! He’s going nowhere, captain!” Blank replied.

“Locked and loaded!” Marcus answered, taking control of the ship’s magitek turrets.

“Engines fired up and ready to fly!” Cinna yelled over the rumble of the vessel’s machinery.

“Great,” Mikoto commented, grabbing the radio microphone. “Madeen, Madeen, this is Gaia One, radio check, over!”

“Yo, Miko! Madeen here,” Eiko’s voice came through the speakers. *“Read you Lima Charlie, babe! Over.”*

As Mikoto finished her preparations, Freya fastened her seat belt and pulled Berlioz’s reliquary out of her backpack. Soon after, the Gaia One took to the skies, followed by the Madeen.

“Do you think they will be alright?” Garnet asked, painfully aware of the futility of her question.

The regent’s bushy mustache curved upwards as he smirked.

“Even if she’s young and impulsive, my girl is a talented leader and has a formidable crew under her command,” Cid answered. “She’ll make sure the Gaia One reaches its destination.”

“Actually, I’m more worried about what awaits them at the end of their journey...” the queen said.

“Fear not, Your Majesty. Freya was chosen for a reason,” Sigfred chimed in out of the blue, giving Garnet a mini heart attack. “If Lord Gizamaluke is still half the man he used to be, then no harm will come to them.”

“Sometimes I forget how silently Burmecians move...” the queen stammered, still startled by his sudden appearance. “You’ve been of great help, Sir Sigfred... sorry for delaying your return home.”

“Time matters not to a ghost, ma’am,” the Partisan replied, clearly reveling in his own choice of words. “However, I shall take my leave now.”

“Will you deliver my message to Sir Fratley?” Garnet asked.

“At once, ma’am.”

“Excellent. I’m looking forward to hearing from him soon,” the queen stated. “Good luck, young knight, and thanks for everything.”

After offering both sovereigns a polite bow, the Partisan disappeared into the fog with a powerful leap.

“Do you think he can be trusted?” Cid asked once the Burmecian was well out of earshot.

“We’ll see about that...” Garnet answered, folding her arms.

**April 2nd, 1820, Aerbs Mountains,
Alexandria.**

4:45 AM

Like a spider lying in ambush, a small Trenoite airship awaited patiently, perched upon a large rock

ledge overlooking the capital of the kingdom. While its crew nervously scanned the mist for signs of their intended prey, a violent argument raged on between the captain and the first mate, fueled by days of being stuck behind enemy lines.

“... For the last time, Red, forget about that damn bounty!” Horik the White exclaimed. “We’re running low on supplies and we’re sitting ducks up here! We can’t stay in Alexandria any longer!”

“And what the hell do you suggest we do, genius? Go back to Bishop empty-handed after what happened?” Lani barked back, planting an armored fist on the wall. “She’ll have our asses mounted on her wall like fucking *trophies!*”

“Not if we exchange the kid for a way outta this mess!” the Burmecian replied. “His family is powerful and well connected. I’m sure they can give us a fresh start!”

“Oh yeah! Let’s go extort *the* most dangerous smuggling ring in the continent!” the cyborg shouted. “What could possibly go wrong?!”

“Aw, *chillax, woman!* We’ve done far ballsier stuff than that!” Horik squawked, realizing a split second too late that he had pushed *the* wrong button.

“... *The fuck you just called me, you buck-toothed piece of shit?*” Lani hissed, wrist-mounted blades springing out of her gauntlets with a terrifying *snap*.

“Boss, we have visual on the target!” one of the mercenaries opportunely intervened, watching the Gaia One leave Alexandria’s walls through his binoculars. “Should we call for reinforcements, sir?”

“And get backstabbed by some random merc, Frank? Naw, we’ll deal with that girl on our own,” Lani shot her subordinate down, sheathing her claws as she walked up to him. “Are you *positive* that’s her, though?”

“Absolutely. No Alexandrian vessel is that fast,” he answered, only to be instantly proven wrong. “W-Wait, she’s being escorted by a second craft..!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me... that’s the godsdamn *Madeen!*” Lani excitedly exclaimed. “Hey Mikey! Get those engines fired up! It’s princess hunting season!”

“What..?! So your big plan is to take on two of the most advanced airships in the world *on our fucking own?!*” Horik spat in utter disbelief.

“Aw, chillax, Mousy!” Lani sneered as their own vessel took to the skies. “We’ve done far ballsier stuff than this!”

5:50 AM

“Whew, we’ve finally made it to the sea...” Mikoto sighed, reclining herself in her seat for the first time in hours. “So, where now, Freya?”

The Burmecian scanned the horizon with her obsidian artifact until she found what they were looking for.

“There it is!” she declared, pointing at an empty spot in the sky. The genome craned a look at Gizamaluke’s star through the mystical glass and shuddered.

“Brr... I’ll never get used to that thing...” she muttered, wondering if Gaia would one day meet its end at the hands of some roaming, nigh-undetectable celestial calamity. “Madeen, this is Gaia one, we’re changing course, eighty degrees to port, over...”

“*Wilco, over,*” Eiko answered over the radio.

The Gaia One gracefully turned west and started making its way towards the Forgotten Continent, followed closely by the Madeen

“... We’ve reached cruise speed. You may unfasten your seat belt now,” the scientist informed, letting out a big yawn.

“I can’t thank you enough for helping us out, Mikoto...” the dragoon said, angling a grateful smile at her.

“I haven’t come all the way from the Outer Continent to lose another brother,” she answered, impatiently drumming her fingers on the steering wheel.

Freya forced herself to swallow the lump in her throat.

“We’ll save him... we’ll save everyone,” she declared, painfully aware of how *empty* her promise was.

“Thank you...” the genome replied without taking her eyes away from her screens. A small, round device captured Freya’s attention due to its intermittent bleeping.

blip...

“What’s this, if I may ask?” she said, pointing at the little gizmo.

blip...

“Oh, that? It’s a radar,” Mikoto explained, relieved by the change of subject. “It tells me if there’s stuff in the vicinity of our ship.”

blip...

“Oh! It’s like a self-writing map, then?”

“Couldn’t have explained it better myself.”

“Fascinating...”

blip...

“What’s that glowing dot over there?” Freya asked, overtaken by curiosity.

“That’s the Madeen... and it’s kind of lagging behind us, now that I think about it,” the genome said. “I’ll slow down a bit so they can catch up.”

“*Hey Mikoto, Marcus here! Do you copy? Over!*” The gunner called out over the intercom.

“Loud and clear, Marcus! What’s wrong? Over.”

“I think I saw movement on our six... as if something was hiding in our blind spot...” he answered, a little nervous. *“Do you think we’re being followed? Over.”*

“Nonsense..!” the scientist reacted, admittedly surprised. “Nothing on Gaia should be able to keep up with us at this speed! Over.”

“... I mean no disrespect, captain, but last week it was impossible to raise a black mage army, and here we are...” the brigand retorted.

blip, blip...

“Ah... Mikoto?” Freya ventured, tapping the radar display with a clawed finger. “... Is it normal to have two glowing dots instead of one on this thing?”

blip, blip...

“What?!” the genome squeaked, shooting a panicked look at the device. “Hey, Kal!”

“WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU, LADY MIKOTO?”

“I want the video feed of cameras five to ten on screen right now!”

“AS YOU WISH,” the AI obliged.

A cluster of moving holograms suddenly appeared all over the ship’s windshield, spooking Freya a little; it was at times like those when she remembered how *alien* Mikoto actually was.

“What’s that..?” the Burmecian asked, noticing a strange, shifting silhouette on one of the images.

“I’m not sure...” the scientist replied. “Looks like a *Zuu...* but there’s no way a normal bird could possibly tail a magitek-powered ship..!”

“Should I go take a look?” the dragoon offered.

“No, we may need to do some *bumping*, so buckle-up,” Mikoto answered before contacting Eiko’s ship. “Madeen, this is Gaia One, do you copy? Over.”

“*Gaia One, this is Madeen. Copy loud and clear!*” the princess answered over the radio. “*Am I going nuts or there’s a bogey on our six? Over.*”

“So it’s not just us...” the genome muttered to herself. “Madeen, stand by and get ready to firewall on my signal! Over!”

“*Wilco! Over.*”

“Alright, Kal, Cinna, get those afterburners ready! We’re going buster!” the genome ordered through the PA system. “Marcus! Prepare to engage!”

“Roger!”

“Firewall..? Buster..?” Freya repeated, pretty confused by all the lingo. *“Ohhh! We’re summoning Phoenix! Great idea, Mikoto!”*

The genome snorted with laughter as she pushed the throttle to the max. “Alright guys! Let’s make ’em eat our metaphorical dust!”

With a deafening bang, both the Gaia One and the Madeen broke the barrier of sound, leaving the unknown ship way behind.

“Captain, we’re losing them!” Franklin yelled.

“Alright, time to deploy the V.O.B.! Those bitches ain’t going anywhere!” Lani ordered.

“You gonna use the freaking Vanguard, Red?!” Horik yelled, utterly surprised. “Are you trying to get us stranded in the middle of the ocean?!”

“Someone’s getting shanked today if he doesn’t shut his fucking trap!” the cyborg barked back without even looking at him. “C’mon Frank, I don’t see us going any faster!”

“A-Alright...” the merc stammered, hesitatingly lifting a yellow lid on the instrument panel to reveal a big red button.

“Aw, get on with it ya *chicken-wuss!*” Lani boomed, smashing the switch with her fist.

A large, rocket-like afterburner emerged from the mercenary ship’s fuselage and sent it flying at breakneck speed toward the fleeing vessels.

“*Ya-hooooooo!*”

“*Miko! They’re closing in!*” Marcus yelled over the intercom. “*What do we do now?!*”

The genome shot a panicked glance at the camera feed and gasped.

“A *Terran overbooster?!*” she squeaked, recognizing the blowtorch-like flame that propelled the unknown ship. “Alright Marcus, shoot it down

as soon as it gets into range! Kal, give him a firing solution!”

“TARGET LOCKED” the AI stated.

“Fire!”

“Shit, shit, shit!” Franklin spat as both the Gaia One and the Madeen unleashed a hail of magitek gunfire on them.

“Rolling scissors, now!” Lani ordered.

“This is madness, Red! We still have the kid on board!” Horik shouted as the vessel did a wide barrel roll to avoid the fusillade.

“He’ll be fine, don’t worry!” the cyborg yelled, clearly having a little too much fun. “Fly us between those two ships, Frank! We need to get up close and personal!”

“What are you planning to do, boss?!”

Lani cackled excitedly.

“To expand our company’s fleet, of course!”

WHOOOM!

“What the fuck was that?!” Franklin screamed; a dimensional rift had been torn open in the middle of the sky, and the Eidolon Madeen was emerging from it, fangs bared and ready to pounce.

“Damn, that’s one ugly Mike Foxtrot!” the cyborg exclaimed. “Must be one of the princess’ Eidolons!”

“*An Eidolon?!* ” the pilot panicked. “What the hell are we supposed to do against that thing?!”

“It won’t be able to fight properly if we get near its master!” Lani answered, switching on the intercom. “Trevor, suppressive fire! Riddle that thing with holes! C’mon Frank, let’s show those posers what true speed looks like!”

“*Aye, aye, captain!*”

Madeen uttered a savage roar and dove like a hawk, gathering an obscene amount of energy in her hands as she chased after the nimble Trenoite speedster.

“Shoot it down, now!”

The Trenoite ship spewed a barrage of magitek gunfire at the Eidolon, hitting her several times, but the winged lioness powered through the onslaught

with righteous fury, determined to protect her *cub* no matter what.

“Listen up, Frankie! Reroute as much power as possible to the shields and keep the ship steady, even if we have to tank a few blasts!” Lani ordered as she rushed to a wall-mounted container and pulled out something that could only be described as a *portable cannon*. “Horik... I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you’re in charge ’til I come back.”

“You’re fucking nuts, Red...” the albino Burmecian commented, realizing what his partner-in-crime was about to do.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” the cyborg answered and then started climbing a metal staircase.

Clack!

WOOOOOOOOOSH!

Impossibly violent winds hit her the very second she climbed out of the ship’s roof hatch, and the aircraft shook from side to side as a volley of enemy fire crashed against its shields.

“*Shit, shit, shit!*” Lani hissed as she balanced precariously on the ship’s fuselage, her boots

clinging to the smooth surface via claw-like hooks. Madeen began concentrating all the raw energy she had amassed into a gigantic, blazing sphere, and the bounty hunter realized that even the tiniest slip-up would spell doom for her entire team.

“Alright, Amarant, you’ve got this!” she muttered to herself as she loaded a thin missile into her weapon with a large soul crystal for a warhead. She rested the rocket launcher on her shoulder, aimed for the Eidolon’s head and exhaled. *“Steady... steady...”*

The lioness finished shaping the energy bomb and took aim, her muscular body contorting in a bizarre way as she prepared to hurl the orb at Lani’s ship.

“Now!”

With magitek-enhanced precision, the bounty hunter opened fire, managing to hit Madeen right in the eye.

BOOOM!

The Eidolon flinched, blinded by the tremendous blast, and lost control of her own magic for an instant, resulting in the catastrophic destabilization of her spell.

“I’m sorry, *Eiko...*” she muttered, painfully aware of what came next. The sphere collapsed in on itself like a miniature sun and went *supernova*, totaling everything in an impossibly huge radius.

KRA-KOOOOOOM!

“*Hrrgggh..!*” Lani uttered as the shockwave sent her tumbling backward like a rag doll. “Shit, shit, shit, *shit!*” she sputtered, desperately clawing at the slippery fuselage until she found a small nook and clung to it for dear life. Both the *Gaia One* and the *Madeen* immediately concentrated their fire on her position in an attempt to avenge the fallen Eidolon, but her ship’s shields bought her enough time to crawl back into the roof hatch.

“Alright, that’s fucking it!” Eiko barked. “Those bitches are going down, *hard!*”

“Your Highness, please calm down!” Major Dionne exclaimed.

“Calm down *my ass*, Dionne! If they shoot Miko down, we’re done for!” the princess countered, picking up the radio microphone. “Gaia One, Gaia One, this is Madeen! I’m breaking out! Over!”

“Madeen, this is Gaia One! Negative! Proceed according to plan!” Mikoto answered over the speaker. *“I say again, proceed according to plan! Over!”*

The summoner drew a deep breath.

“... Negative,” she answered. “... Complete the mission, darling. I’m stopping those fuckers right here and now. *Out.*”

“Eiko, wait-!” bzzt.

“Alright team, for the second time in a week, the future of the continent depends on us!” the princess exclaimed. “If the Gaia One gets taken out, Burmecia remains a tyranny and Alexandria loses its king, and that sure as hell ain’t happening on my watch!”

“What are your orders, ma’am?” the second mate asked.

“Break out the big guns and set an interception course, Flynn!” Eiko ordered, readying her summoning catalyst for another invocation. “... We’ll show ’em some Lindblumese hospitality!”

“Woo-hoo! And that’s why you’re the boss, boss!” Franklin greeted Lani as she re-entered the flight deck.

“This isn’t over yet, Frank,” the cyborg dryly stated. “How’s the Vanguard holding up?”

“We’re nearing bingo fuel, but we have more than enough to catch up with our target,” the pilot replied with a smirk, but his confidence was promptly crushed once he realized what Eiko’s vessel was doing. “Sir... the Lindblumese ship is breaking formation!”

“An interception vector...” the bounty hunter muttered. “Why would that royal *brat* endanger herself like this..?”

“... Maybe you were right after all, Red,” Horik commented, stroking his chin. “If the princess of Lindblum herself is covering the other ship’s escape, then they must be transporting something extremely valuable.”

“Something... or *someone*...” Lani theorized. “Frank, I don’t care what you need to do, just get me near their lead airship. We must hijack it before we run outta gas!”

“Aye aye, sir!”

Author's note:

Sorry for the huuuge delay, folks, between the shooting of our new short film (which got cancelled due to that damn coronavirus outbreak), and the enormous amount of extra work the epidemic brought us, sitting down and writing has been nigh impossible lately. I hope you all are fine... these are certainly difficult times and the only way we're gonna get this disease under control is acting responsibly and taking measures to prevent contagion.

Wash your hands often! Soap destroys the virus' lipid envelope and makes it hard for it to cling to your skin. If you are in a contagion zone, respect social distancing! Protecting yourselves is also a way to protect others!

Good luck to y'all and stay safe!

31. Beyond (Part One)

“They’re trying to fly past us, ma’am!” Flynn exclaimed.

“They didn’t take the bait... they must be after Zidane! *But how did they know..?!?*” Eiko panicked. “Errol, reinforce our shields and fly us straight at those assholes! Don’t let ’em get away!”

“Are you planning to *crash into them*, ma’am?!” Major Dionne squawked.

“Nope. I’m not underestimating them again, that’s all,” the princess explained as she picked up the intercom microphone. “Biggs, Wedge! Is the *Bahamut* ready to fire?”

“*Fully charged and standing by*, ma’am!” the duo answered in tandem over the PA system.

“Good! Padlock on that bandit and wait for my order!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

SPAK-SPAK-SPAK!

“Contact!” Flynn shouted; a volley of enemy gunfire had harmlessly bounced off the Madeen’s force barrier like raindrops on an umbrella.

“Phht, for all their bullshit gadgets, they sure are lacking in the heat department,” Eiko stated and then began playing a summoning spellsong.

“Even after all these years, you still can’t play the flute...” a telepathic voice rang in the princess’ mind.

“Everyone’s a critic nowadays,” she psychically retorted with a smirk. *“Thanks for answering my call, buddy... how’s Maddie doing?”*

“She didn’t exactly take what happened in stride, but she’ll be fine,” the Eidolon replied, much to the summoner’s relief. *“So, how shall we avenge her honor?”*

“Remember that run-in with the Sto’varathan raiders last year?” Eiko asked. *“Do you think we could repeat that?”*

“Of course! It’d be my pleasure,” the spirit gleefully agreed.

“Cool. Wait for my signal,” the summoner ordered. *“Alright, guys, let’s dance!”*

“We’re not even scratching them, boss!” the mercenary pilot yelled.

“Told you this would happen...” Horik sighed.

“Just shut up and drive, Frank! They’re not the target!” Lani barked, taking her eyes off the Madeen just long enough to miss its *huge* magitek cannon coming out through a gun port.

“*C-Captain!*” the gunner stuttered, pointing at the enemy ship with a quivering finger.

“Yeah?”

“*Looooook!*”

Lani’s jaw slackened as she stared at the *Bahamut*’s blazing maw in awe.

“Oh, *fuck!* Jink, *jink!*” she frantically ordered.

The Madeen took aim and fired a projectile about half the size of the Trenoite vessel. Franklin realized that he was about to fly right into the incoming energy beam and he dodged it by the skin of his teeth, screaming the whole time.

“*Ha-haaa! Adios, motherfuckers!*” Lani guffawed.

“Eidolon at our nine!” Horik exclaimed, having just noticed another portal appearing near their position. Carbuncle emerged from it, mockingly waved at them and then magically redirected the Bahamut’s beam right at the mercenary ship.

KRA-KOOOOOOM!

“*Hrrrgh!*” the cyborg uttered, clinging to the pilot’s seat as the ship shook violently from side to side.

“Engine two’s bent! We’ve lost a wing too!” Franklin screamed, struggling to stabilize their doomed aircraft. All sorts of alarms started ringing simultaneously, indicating the catastrophic damage the vessel had suffered.

“*We need to leave!*” Horik shouted, grabbing Lani by the shoulder, but she shook him off.

“Deploy the lifeboat and take Soren back to ’Mecia!” she barked back, pushing Franklin out of his seat and taking his place. “I’m not done here yet!”

“... Have it your way, Red. I’m outta here,” the albino exasperatedly answered.

“Boom! Right up their tailpipe!” Major Dionne cheered.

“Not quite...” Eiko replied, activating the intercom. “Biggs, reload the Bahamut! Wedge, hit them with everything we’ve got! Don’t stop ’til they splash!”

“Yes, *ma’am!*” the duo answered.

“Look! There’s a smaller vessel coming out of the target!” the pilot observed. “They’re heading back, should we chase them?”

“Negative! Focus on the main ship!” the princess ordered and then retreated deep into her psychic link with Carbuncle. “*Ready for round two, buddy?*”

“*I’ll blast ’em in the face this time!*” the Eidolon replied, irate at Lani’s tenacity.

“Dammit, dammit, *dammit...*” Lani repeated like a mantra as wave after wave of enemy gunfire tore her ship to shreds. With her barrier generators destroyed, she was essentially flying a huge, depressurized coffin strapped to a turbine; however, the monstrous afterburner had proven a formidable

ally in her hunt, and she was so close to Mikoto's ship that she could almost touch it.

SPAK!

"Yaaaagh!" she screamed as she bumped her head against the instrument panel; an energy bullet had found its way into the flight deck, perforated her right lung and exited the vessel through the wind shield.

"WARNING! MAJOR TRAUMA DETECTED!" a synthetic voice in her helmet exclaimed. "SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IMMEDIATELY!"

"Fuck... so... close..." she wheezed, lying in a pool of her own blood as a deathly drowsiness began to seep into her brain.

"VITAL SIGNS FALTERING! PHOENIX PROTOCOL ENGAGED!" the voice declared as her suit automatically pumped her bloodstream full of Elixir and then sealed the gaping hole in her chest with a sticky, rapidly solidifying agent. "SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IMMEDIATELY!"

As the powerful healing cocktail took hold, she drew a sharp, quivering breath. Her senses were numb and her body felt like a bag of bricks, but she began to slowly rise to her feet.

CLANG! the roof hatch went as the bounty hunter tore it off its hinges with a single punch. *Mach one* winds welcomed her back to the battered surface of her airship, and she thanked the gods for having brought enough spare parts to fix her anti-exposure helmet beforehand.

“*Alright... this is it... everything or nothing!*” she thought, bracing herself for *the* most dangerous jump of her life; the Gaia One was only a few yards away, but beneath her feet a cold, watery grave awaited.

WHOOOM!

“What the..?” Lani muttered, realizing not only that the *Bahamut* had been fired again, but also that Carbuncle was floating nearby, ready to intercept the beam.

“***This is for Maddie, you piece of junk,***” the imp Eidolon said before deflecting the massive energy bolt with a Reflect spell.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit!” Lani sputtered as she leaped off her ship; then Carbuncle’s projectile hit the vessel, causing it to explode in a spectacular blast.

KRA-KOOOOM!

The bounty hunter screamed as the shockwave propelled her even further, causing her to land flat on her stomach upon the Gaia One. She rolled and tumbled sideways, pushed by the brutal winds, until she managed to sink one of her claws in the aluminum fuselage. Blood came out of her mouth and the voice in her helmet urged her once again to seek medical attention, but she planted her other claw with unyielding determination and began dragging herself toward the front of the ship.

“Sweet mother of...” Mikoto muttered, watching Lani’s slow but determined advance through a security camera. “Isn’t that..?”

“*Lani...*” Freya said through gritted teeth.

Lub-dub...

“*Nggh..!*” the dragoon groaned, grabbing her chest; a sharp, throbbing pain in her heart warned her about the Beast’s awakening.

Lub-dub...

“Freya..?” the genome hesitatingly asked.

Lub-dub... lub-dub...

“Not now... not... ***now!***” Freya stammered, feeling her grasp on reality quickly ebb away. “*Breathe, Freya, breathe...*”

“Fear not... I’m on your side this time...” the monster in the back of her mind whispered.

“*Crawl back into your pit... creature!*” she answered as firmly as she could, realizing that she was trembling uncontrollably.

“You know you can’t fight her without magic...”

“I... don’t need you..!”

“... Without my power, you and your friends are doomed...”

“*You’re a threat... to everyone’s safety!*” Freya mumbled, reflexively curling up into a ball. “*I... will never let you loose again!*”

“You’re in no shape to refuse me now, sister...” the Beast hissed like a rattlesnake, forcing her to relive her darkest memories over and over.

“No! Stop! *Rrrrrrrgh!*” the knight grunted, pulling her hair in desperation.

“To think I respected you once...”

“Yaaaaaargh!”

Lub-dub-lub-dub-lub-dub-lub-dub!

“I am you, and you are me. One and the same...”

“No!”

“ONE AND THE SAME!”

“NOOOO!” the knight shrieked, and her body burst into a shifting mass of steel and flames.

“Agh!” Mikoto squeaked, accidentally steering the Gaia One off-course. The sharp turn, combined with Freya’s fiery aura disintegrating her seat belt, caused her to fall and tumble sideways. ***“Oh, Freya! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”***

The Burmecian growled like a panther and quickly regained her footing. Two blazing eyes glared at the scientist as she began to levitate, the full extent of her power unleashed by the transformation.

“Airlock... Now...” the fiery knight ordered, her voice no longer recognizable. She then blasted a hole in the flight deck’s door and left through it.

“I-I hope you know what you’re doing...” Mikoto stuttered, remotely opening the airlock for her.

“Just... a little... further...” Lani muttered to herself, still clinging to the vessel despite her wounds and Mikoto’s brutal maneuver. However, the genome had also deployed the air brakes for reasons she didn’t yet understand, making it much easier for her to stay on its surface.

“WARNING! MAJOR TRAUMA DETECTED! SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IMMEDIATELY!” the voice in her helmet wouldn’t stop repeating, and she would have gladly tossed the damn thing away if it hadn’t been wired to her head.

“*Huh..?*” she uttered, a strange, crackling buzz suddenly drawing her attention. She looked behind her, only to see what looked like a white fireball coming directly at her. “*Oh, shi-!*”

“DIE!”

“*Waaaaagh!*” the cyborg screamed as Freya grabbed her by the neck and used her tremendous

momentum to drag her across the fuselage, producing a huge shower of sparks.

RAKKKKKK!

“CAUTION! BACKPLATE INTEGRITY AT FIFTY PERCENT!” the helmet’s AI announced.

“Shut... the fuck...” Lani growled, overloading her suit’s powerstones to unleash a defensive energy pulse. “... *UP!*”

BOOOM!

“*Nrrgh!*” the Burmecian grunted, in pain but still refusing to let go of her prey. “*Is that all you’ve got?!*”

“B-But how..?!”

“My turn!”

With a psychotic grin on her face, Freya sank her claws into the mercenary’s gorget until she drew blood, leaped upward and then slammed her head-first into the ship’s hull with enough force to bend the metal inwards.

WHAM!

“WARNING! MAJOR TRAUMA DETECTED!” the critical injury alarm rang, much to the dragoon’s delight.

“I’ll take that as a compliment!” the knight exclaimed, punching the cyborg so hard that her faceplate *cracked* and blood splattered her fractured visor. ***“Come on, impostor! Put up a fight if you really are Amarant!”***

“*Fuck you!*” Lani barked, launching a clawed uppercut at her opponent, but she caught her wrist in her hand and crushed it mercilessly until the mercenary screamed in pain.

“*Yaaaaaaagh!*”

“Louder! I want all of Alexandria to hear you!” the Burmecian cackled as the Beast rapidly encroached on her sanity.

Lani immediately aimed her other palm at Freya’s face, intent on blasting her point-blank with her magic, but the dragoon proved once again faster on the draw.

STAB!

The mercenary howled in pure agony; her opponent had swiftly impaled her right arm with an

energy javelin, pinning it to the ship.

“Come on, bitch! I don’t have all day! Fight me!” the frenzied knight demanded, letting go of Lani’s left wrist to punch her in the face, shattering her helmet like glass and revealing her terrified, bloodshot eyes.

“Agh! I... I give up..!”

“Wrong answer!”

CRACK!

Warm blood splashed Freya’s knuckles, helmet and breastplate, evaporating on contact with her aura. With a nightmarish grin, she raised her fist once again.

“*Nnnrrgh..!* No, please! *Nooo!*” the bounty hunter begged.

“Fight me!”

CRACK!

CRACK!

CRACK!

“... *please..!*” Lani whimpered almost by reflex, barely aware of her surroundings.

“I said FIGHT ME!”

CRACK!

**“VITAL SIGNS FALTERING! SEEK
MEDICAL ATTENTION IMMEDIATELY!”**

CRACK!

“...”

CRACK!

CRACK!

CRACK!

SQUELCH!

...

...

...

“What have you done..?” the last remnants of Freya’s sanity whispered from the back of her mind.

The Beast relaxed its grip on her soul, just so she could witness the aftermath of her rampage.

“Huh..?” the knight mumbled, suddenly coming to her senses. ***“Oh, no... no, no, no, no!”***

“A truly wonderful job, sister...” the Beast sadistically complimented her. **“I couldn’t have done it better myself...”**

Freya grabbed her head, struggling to think clearly.

“She was being controlled, for Reis’ sake!” she hissed through gritted teeth. *“We didn’t have to... we didn’t have to kill her!”*

“Then why didn’t you stop?” the voice in her head taunted her. **“I’ll tell you why: she deserved it, and you enjoyed it.”**

Freya staggered back, surprised and hurt about being unable to draw a clear line between the Beast’s bloodlust and her own desires. The damn thing was *right*, taking all her pent-up rage and frustration out on Lani had been extremely cathartic... but pummeling a tortured, mind-controlled soul to death was *anything but* justice.

Suddenly, she had an idea.

“Mother Reis... hear my plea in this time of-! Nnngh!”

“Oh, no, you won’t!” the Beast psychically yanked her chain, forcing the rest of the prayer back

into her throat. **“A mass murderer like her isn’t worthy of the Lady’s mercy!”**

“That’s not... for you... to decide..!” the Burmecian grunted, putting every ounce of her willpower into reaching out to the Cleyran goddess. *“Mother Reis... please..!”*

KRA-KOOOM!

Freya gasped, taken aback by the sudden, deafening thunderclap. Startled, she looked up and noticed a monstrous storm front that wasn’t there mere *seconds* ago, coming straight at them with unnatural speed. Mikoto futilely tried to maneuver out of the ominous clouds’ path, but they devoured the ship nonetheless.

“What in the name of..?!” the Burmecian thought, witnessing in awe the swirling bowels of the tempest; otherworldly auroras danced around the vessel as lightning set the sky ablaze at random intervals. She realized that gravity seemed to have lost its pull, as she started to levitate without meaning to.

A floating orb of light appeared in front of the Gaia One, tiny at first, but rapidly growing in size.

Its glow increased exponentially as well, forcing Freya to cover her eyes.

“W-*What is this?!*” she yelled, utterly terrified. The last thing she did before falling unconscious was screaming in terror as the radiance engulfed her.

Author’s note:

Before you kill me in my sleep, consider reading Brayden12021’s fics! He’s a fellow Freya fan who’s written some pretty damn cool stories! Go check ’em out! Also, don’t miss Paladin777’s “When thorns prick inwards”, which is a moving and really well written retelling of the attack on Alexandria from Beatrix’s point of view! Happy reading and stay safe!

32. Beyond (Part Two)

Freya woke up lying on the sand.

“*Air..! I need to breathe!*” was the first thought her battered mind could articulate. Fire burned inside her lungs, so she started coughing up salty water.

She was alone.

“*Where am I..?*” she muttered, realizing that she had washed up on an unknown shore, with no means to determine her location. Drenched from head to toe, she crawled out of the sea and rolled onto her back.

“*Huh..?!*”

Had she been standing, she would have lost her footing once she glimpsed what was above; there was neither sun nor moons to be seen, only a bloated, Memoria-like *thing* floating ominously in the infinite void.

“That’s the Field of Warriors, *Fólkvangr*...” Gizamaluke said out of the blue, giving Freya a mini heart attack. He was sitting beside her,

contemplating his father's kingdom with a melancholic expression. "It doesn't look so glorious from here, huh?"

"*Gods...* don't scare me like that!" the Burmecian squawked, rubbing her face with a sandy hand. A terrible realization dawned on her, and she shot a desperate look at the phantom. "Wait... *where's everyone?!*"

He laughed.

"Do you know what this place is?"

The knight realized that her metaphysical knowledge had just hit a hard limit, so she remained silent.

"... You're the first mortal to ever visit Ginnungagap *thrice*," Gizamaluke stated with a smirk. "I have no idea if that makes you extremely lucky or not."

"*Ginnungagap..?* The primordial abyss?" Freya asked.

"Bingo," he answered. "Somewhere, deep within this void, beats the heart of the universe."

"The Crystal..."

“Clever girl.”

“So, how does that answer my original question?” the knight irritably retorted. “I won’t cooperate until I’m sure they’re safe!”

Gizamaluke retreated into his thoughts for a second, trying to cobble together an explanation that a flesh being could understand.

“Time in Ginnungagap behaves more like a surface than a stream; if you know how to exploit this, you can make a year spent inside this realm seem like a mere blink to an outside viewer... or ten times longer,” he said, only to get a bewildered stare as an answer. Realizing that he needed to adopt a more *didactic* approach, he opened a portal to Gaia in the sky with a wave of his hand, revealing Mikoto and Eiko’s airships still trapped within the storm. Both of them were fixed in place by an unknown force, as if they had been put under a Stop spell.

“What kind of sorcery is this..?” Freya uttered, disturbed by the unnatural sight.

“Let’s put it this way...” the god tried again. “As long as you and the Genome king stay here, time in Gaia will stand still. Nobody will even notice you’ve left.”

“Genome king..? You mean Zidane? Is he okay?!” the Burmecian blurted out. “Where is he?”

“I’ve already brought him to my village to begin his treatment,” Gizamaluke answered, averting his gaze. “... By the way, I’m sorry about what happened on that ship... I couldn’t reach you in time.”

The tide seemed to bring Freya’s memories back to her, and as the foam licked her calloused toes, she drew her knees close to her chest and stared absently at the horizon.

“... Yet again, I’ve failed to protect someone...” she muttered.

“... Were you close with her?”

“Not really...” the knight sighed. “She was *precious* to an old friend of mine. Now I’ll never be able to look him in the eye again...”

Gizamaluke folded his arms and quietly pondered the situation.

“Well, this tragedy can still be averted...” the deity spoke after a brief pause, and much to Freya’s surprise, there was a hint of hesitance in his voice. “... provided you do what’s necessary.”

“What..?” she muttered, shooting an incredulous look at him. “That’s impossible! Not even *Berlioz* can stop human souls from reaching the Crystal! That’s the whole point of the Dragon’s Cre-!”

“Forget about his lies for a second,” the god interrupted her. “... What if I told you that I’ve found a way to bring her back without one?”

The Burmecian forgot how to breathe for a moment.

“No way...” she whispered, staring at Gizamaluke with her eyes wide open. “... It was you! You sent my father to contact me!”

“... Took you long enough to figure it out,” the phantom answered with a smirk.

“Does Berlioz know..?”

“We wouldn’t be alive if he was actually omniscient, now would we?”

“But how..?”

The god rose to his feet with a stern expression on his visage, and Freya followed suit; she had always been tall, even among her kind, but Gizamaluke’s Burmecian form literally *towered* above her and pretty much everyone she knew.

“Knowledge has a price, and believe me, you’re not ready to pay for it yet.”

“I see... so there’s something huge going on behind the scenes...” the dragoon thought. “I don’t get it, though... why give me all this information if you fear that I might betray you?”

“Please, don’t get me wrong,” Gizamaluke politely replied. “I chose you for many reasons, but I’ll keep the details to myself until I’m absolutely sure I can trust you.”

“Hah... do I look like I would *rat you out*?” she snarked, mentally facepalming at her own joke.

The god indulged in a hearty chuckle.

“No, no, no, my dear! Actually, I want you to spread the word to all of Burmecia!” he answered, earning himself a bewildered stare. Amused by her confused look, he patted her on the shoulder and started making his way back to his village. “Don’t worry, I’ll explain everything in due time. Now, let’s get started with your treatment, shall we?”

After an unclear amount of walking (time and distance in Ginnungagap felt utterly weird to a

mortal), the forest path gave way to a picturesque village next to a creek. Strangely familiar little huts built atop low wooden platforms dominated the scenery, and Freya's sharp sense of smell immediately picked up the aroma of freshly baked bread, steaming lentil stew and wild flowers.

"Hold on a second... *I know this place..!*" she thought out loud.

Gizamaluke smiled.

"During the eternity I spent adrift as a ghost, I came across a swarm of lost souls who had been rejected by the Crystal because of their unnatural origin," the god said as he led Freya to a rustic footbridge. "Luckily, these beings possessed vast magical powers, so we joined forces to find our way back to my realm."

The revelation stopped the dragon knight dead in her tracks.

"... This is a replica of the Black Mage Village, isn't it?" she said, on the verge of tears. "Is... is *he* here..?"

"Who..? Zidane?"

“No... well, yes... but I’m talking about Vivi right now,” the dragoon said. “... Is he here?”

The god folded his arms and thought for a moment.

“No, I don’t seem to recall anyone by that name...” he answered. “I take it he was a black mage too, right?”

“Oh... yeah...” Freya sighed, utterly disheartened. “The kindest one...”

“Hmm... cover your ears, I have an idea,” Gizamaluke told her and then he let out such a *piercing* whistle that it echoed across the whole dimension.

“Ggh... *darnit*...” the Burmecian squawked, rubbing her aching ears. “What was that for?!”

The rumble of a thousand feet stomping the ground yanked Freya’s attention back to the village, and her question was promptly answered when hundreds of black mages poured out of their homes and rushed to the bridge to greet them.

“I can’t believe it, it’s really you!” No. 293 yelled, ecstatically shaking the knight’s hand.

“Oh, c’mon! Lemme see!” No. 33 boomed, trying to peek over No.234’s shoulder.

“I want a handshake too!”

“Whoa!” the Burmecian exclaimed, overwhelmed by all the attention.

“Oh, oh, Lady Freya! Remember me?”

“Gosh, she’s even prettier than a chocobo!”

“Alright, alright, calm down everybody!” Gizamaluke intervened, politely driving the mages back. “Listen up! Lady Freya and Lord Zidane are feeling a little sick, so they’ll stay with us for a while and we’ll help them recover. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes, Mr. Giz!” the multitude answered in unison like children in a classroom.

“*Gods... Mikoto would kill to see this..!*” the dragoon thought.

“Great! Oh, before I forget, does anyone know a black mage called Vivi?” Gizamaluke asked the golems. “He’s Lady Freya’s friend, and she’s looking for him.”

Every single one of them raised a hand.

“Well... that was easy...” the god commented, arching a surprised eyebrow. “Would you please tell us where he is?”

The villagers exchanged uneasy glances for a moment until one of them stepped forward. Despite a lack of facial traits beyond his perpetually glowing eyes, he looked decidedly older and wiser than the rest of his kin.

“Lord Gizamaluke, Lady Freya...” No. 288 greeted them with a polite, tremulous voice, tipping his hat like an elderly gentleman. He sounded positively *ancient* despite being two decades the dragoon’s junior. “... I’m afraid that he’s not here, nor has he ever been...”

“... *What..?*” Freya mumbled.

“The spirit plane is an incomprehensibly vast place... it’s a miracle that we could gather this many souls,” Gizamaluke regretfully stated. “I’m sorry...”

She didn’t believe it at first. “*This must be a trap... a vile lie..!*” she thought, futilely trying to convince herself that the universe somehow had the ability to *care*, but deep down she knew it was certainly *not* the case. Her face slowly contorted into

a look of utter rage, and she clenched her fists so hard that she could have turned coal into diamonds.

“... Are you insinuating...” she hissed through gritted teeth. “... that despite all he did for this *ungrateful* world, he was damned to forever wander the void *alone..?*”

“Now you’re beginning to understand the way I feel...” the deity replied.

“He was a just a child...” the Burmecian growled as her lip curled into a ferocious snarl. “*He was just a child, dammit!*”

Gizamaluke placed a hand on her shoulder, yanking her back to reality. Her body tensed up, surprised by the unexpected contact, and she craned a bewildered glare at him.

“What if I told you that I can give you the power to do something about it?” he said almost in a whisper. “... The power to uproot this rotten system once and for all...”

Freya’s jaw quivered.

“*Bastard...* how dare you use Vivi to force my hand..?” she croaked as a lonely tear ran down her cheek. “... You’re just like your father!”

The phantom god retreated his hand and averted his eyes, visibly upset by the accusation. “You misunderstand...”

“Then help me understand!” Freya dryly retorted.

Gizamaluke made a brief pause, considered his options, and then he returned her stare with unprecedented intensity.

“... This way,” he said.

Author’s note:

Hello, everyone! Jota Te here.

After its longest hiatus yet, TLCB is back! I’ve been ***ultra busy*** these days, but I’m determined to give this story the ending it deserves or die trying! (... okay, maybe I exaggerated a bit, haha!).

Joking aside, thank you so much for waiting and staying tuned after all this time, guys. You’re awesome!

33. A Knight in the Woods

**April 2nd, 1820, Rolfsen Estate, Daines-Horse
Basin, Burmecia**

10:30

“They are breathtaking... aren’t they?” Sigrunn sighed, absently contemplating her late mentor’s cherry tree. It had by that point shed most of its flowers, painting the garden a pale shade of pink. Fratley swallowed the lump in his throat, and hesitatingly sat next to her.

“Indeed...” he answered after an awkward moment of silence. *She sure had changed since Puck’s funeral*, the knight thought; before that fateful night she had been an arrogant, naïve and boundlessly energetic *wunderkind*. One of Sir Wulfweard’s most promising students *ever*. Now she was a shell-shocked, barely functional shadow of her former self.

“He used to say... that life is beautiful because it’s fleeting...” she hiccuped, crying silently. Her

lips were slightly parted and her jaw was quivering. “*Bullshit...* I want him back...”

She was so absorbed in her own misery that she didn’t even register Fratley’s hand gently settling on her shoulder.

“The Allfather blessed him with an honorable death...” he said, but his voice lacked conviction. “He has earned a place among the gods. We should be proud of him.”

“That’s not the point..! This was *my* fault... it should have been *me!*” Sigrunn exploded, shooting the knight a glassy-eyed glare before burying her face in her hands. “... What the hell are we supposed to do now, Fratley?”

The veteran dragoon’s right ear perked up, and his lips curled into a smirk. “Maybe Sigfred has the answer to that question,” he said, craning a look at a seemingly empty spot. “Welcome back, boy.”

“Sorry... I didn’t mean to intrude,” the young bard sheepishly excused himself as he dispelled his invisibility charm.

“You might be invisible, but you’re definitely not inaudible,” the dragoon stated. “How was your trip? Could you contact Freya?”

Sigfred hesitated to answer.

“Yes, she... *umm...* didn’t take the news very well...”

Fratley lowered his gaze. “Of course she didn’t...” he sighed. “At least she’s still safe.”

“*Yeeah...* about that...”

The blond warrior opened his eyes so wide that Sigfred thought they would pop out of their sockets, crossed the garden in three strides and grabbed him by the shoulders. “She’s safe... *right?!?*”

“Dude, calm down!” the bard squawked. “Last time I saw her, she was boarding a strange airship!”

“A *strange airship?!?* Where was she going?”

“I overheard she was off to visit Lord Gizamaluke, but that’s all I know!” Sigfred answered. “By the way, I’ve also discovered what the chancellor was trying to hide the other night...”

“*Huh?*” Fratley and Sigrunn uttered in unison.

“... Treno launched a surprise invasion of Alexandria and came within *inches* of taking the capital,” the musician explained. “They may have failed, but the citadel took some serious damage...”

Fratley let go of the Partisan, his face transfigured into a look of pure shock. "... *What..?*"

"It gets worse..." the bard added. "There's a growing rumor about Ulrich helping Bishop smuggle troops into Alexandria..."

"What do you mean *smuggle troops?!?*" the knight asked, already feeling a little dizzy.

"The golem shipments that we discovered last week were meant for this," Sigfred explained. "This is *bad*, guys... if Burmecia is proven guilty of facilitating the attack, Garnet is going to need a pretty good reason not to declare war on us..."

"*Did she say that?*" Sigrunn exclaimed. "I can't believe she's threatening us after what we've done for her!"

"Yeah, but civil unrest is spreading like wildfire, and she's trying to prevent things from escalating," the bard retorted, to the other Partisans' astonishment. "It won't be long before she's forced to disclose that most golem caches were found in the Burmecian district... I saw them with my own eyes..."

"*Going to war against a summoner..! what was he thinking..?!*" Fratley thought, feeling an ominous

chill running down his spine.

“There must be something we can do to stop this!” Sigrunn piped up. “Did she tell you anything else?”

“Um, she gave me a message for you, Fratley,” the musician added.

“For *me..?*” the knight asked, a little surprised. “I’m listening...”

“It struck me as an ultimatum, but I have no idea what it actually means,” Sigfred answered, and then cleared his throat. “*A flaming salamander appeared, roaming spiritual mountains. Astute chieftains, terribly misled, ignobly challenged its associates. Two days later, four kingdoms were pointlessly ravaged.*”

“That was the corniest threat I’ve ever heard...” Sigrunn commented. “*Idiot code*, perhaps?.”

“No. It’s *null cipher*,” the dragoon declared, producing a piece of paper and a charcoal pencil. “Sigfred, could you repeat that from the beginning, please?”

The bard obliged, and Fratley wrote down the sequence. “*Oh gods...*” he muttered once the

decryption was complete.

“What? What does it mean?” Sigrunn impatiently asked.

“A lot of things, actually...” the dragoon answered. “The flaming salamander is none other than Amarant Coral, hero of the Mist War. Apparently he’s somewhere in the Popos Heights plateau, and the queen is giving us forty-eight hours to contact him.”

“Popos Heights?! How the hell are we supposed to find him there?!” Sigfred exclaimed. “The dragons will tear us a new one once they see us approaching!”

“And Lord Gizamaluke’s temple is guarded by *dragonslayers*...”

“Besides, how can we be sure he’s alive?” the bard added. “This is Popos *freaking* Heights we’re talking about!”

“The sooner we get there, the better our chances of extracting him,” the veteran knight concluded. “Alright. Sigfred, tell Brynhild to get the Sidewinder ready, we’re leaving in an hour.”

“W-We..?”

“Yes, Freddy, we. You’ll help us infiltrate the plateau’s airspace,” Fratley declared, leaving no room for argument.

“... Right away, sir...” the bard sighed, heading for the hangar. “Aw, *crap... here we go again...*”

“Sigrunn, I need you to warn Astrid about this. The Senate must know what’s going on,” the blond dragoon ordered once Sigfred was out of earshot.

“But what if I... what if I turn into that *thing* again..?” she asked, trying to keep her jaw from quivering. “I almost killed Bryn and Freddy the other night... what if I screw everything up again?”

“You’re Master Wulfweard’s *star pupil*, Siggy, you *can* do this,” Fratley answered. “Burmecia’s future depends on it.”

The young Partisan wiped her face with her sleeve and nodded.

“Consider it done,” she answered, rising to her feet. “Please... take care out there.”

**April 2nd, 1820, Gizamaluke’s cabin,
Ginnungagap**

Day 1

For an unspeakably powerful divinity, ancient protector and advisor of the Burmecian people, Lord Gizamaluke's house was extremely austere. His bedroom had next to no decoration, its contents mostly comprised of a single bed, two wooden chairs, an unconscious Genome and two Burmecians.

"Tch... he's burning with fever..." Freya stated, feeling Zidane's forehead with the back of her hand. *"Tell me truth... will he make it..?"*

"I can help him cope with his condition, but it's mostly up to him to save himself... the same goes for you," Gizamaluke answered as he packed his rustic pipe with tobacco and carefully tamped it down. Once he had finished the procedure, he angled an inquisitive look at the Burmecian. *"Do you mind if I..?"*

"Go ahead..." she answered, already used to the nicotine-laden atmosphere of Burmecian taverns. *"I need to know... what's happening to us?"*

“... To understand the answer to that question, you must first comprehend the true nature of Trance,” Gizamaluke stated, lighting his pipe with a tiny fire spell. “Do you know why he’s the only Genome who can naturally Trance?”

“Because he has an actual soul?” Freya ventured.

“He’s not the only one who does,” the deity retorted. “No matter how hard she tries, his sister will never spontaneously transform, yet she’s definitely *not* an empty vessel.”

“So... what’s the difference between them?”

Gizamaluke smiled and exhaled an ethereal cloud of smoke. “*Mist*,” he answered, watching his creation disperse into the air like a dream.

“*Mist*? But what about Kuja?” the dragoon countered. “He was exposed to it long before Zidane was!”

“That’s not the point; Kuja was already a man when he visited Gaia for the first time...” he stated. “Fully self-aware souls are mostly immune to infestation, and thus unable to naturally develop Trance.”

“*Infestation?*” Freya blurted out. “I knew the Mist could induce psychotic episodes, but I had no idea it could actually *possess* people!”

“It’s not an actual possession, *it’s a symbiotic relationship*,” Gizamaluke clarified. “The Mist is the spiritual equivalent of *mincemeat*; an heterogeneous amalgam of ectoplasm. Given their nature as parts of the Crystal, drifting spirits are naturally attracted to stabler souls, especially incomplete ones...”

“... That’s why they invade other living beings... they’re blindly trying to keep the cycle going!”

“Exactly! With most routes to the Crystal blocked by the lifa Tree, they began infesting the living, causing innumerable problems.”

“*Disgusting...*” she uttered, feeling dirty on a metaphysical level. “So, how do we flush these things out of our bodies?”

“My dear, that would be tantamount to *lobotomizing* yourselves,” he said, his visage ominously wreathed in smoke. “Once the fusion is complete, the parasite and its host become inseparable. Two sides of a coin. Extirpating it would only tear your mind asunder.”

Freya blinked stupidly at him, feeling somewhere between cheated and utterly confused.

“I don’t understand... I thought the *Beast* was a manifestation of the parasite!”

“*Not at all*. What you call the *Beast* is not an autonomous entity; it’s just a warped defense mechanism,” he explained. “When an infested host is subjected to extreme physical or emotional trauma, the parasite reacts like an adrenal gland of sorts, secreting vast amounts of spiritual energy...”

“The mother of all fight-or-flight responses...”

“Couldn’t describe it better myself!” the god merrily concurred. “Gaia is a dangerous place after all, and Trance can be a game changer in a life-or-death situation.”

“Only when it feels like collaborating,” the Burmecian huffed. “Right now, I can recount half a dozen times I *needed* it, and it just didn’t happen.”

“That’s because you’ve built up a remarkable tolerance to stress, but that doesn’t mean you’ve made it through all those close calls unscathed,” Gizamaluke explained, pausing to take another puff at his pipe. “Every single time you transform, a fraction of the energy released by the parasite

remains in your system, unable to find a way out. This residual essence eventually rots and accumulates, creating tumor-like overgrowths that can become large enough to suffocate your soul if you keep accumulating traumatic experiences.”

“Like a toxin buildup...”

“Precisely,” the god agreed, craning a look at the unconscious Genome. “From that point on, they gradually invade the inner layers of the soul, warping it in nightmarish ways. The symptoms include violent mood swings, panic attacks, vivid hallucinations, and increasingly frequent psychotic episodes. The parasite interprets them as external threats and reacts inducing a Trance, thus creating a vicious cycle.”

“I see... so there are no demons to vanquish,” the knight concluded, utterly disheartened. “Except for those in our past...”

“I’m afraid you’re right...”

“What happens if we run out of time?”

“You’ll enter a state of permanent, yet increasingly unstable Trance. Once your parasites’ reserves are exhausted, they will resort to torching your souls, amplifying your power to god-like levels

at the cost of what remains of your bodies and minds,” Gizamaluke explained.

“... How long do we have left?”

Before Gizamaluke could conjure an answer, Zidane started mumbling unintelligibly and stirring in his sleep. Alarmed, Freya dropped the conversation and held his hand, trying to calm him down.

“*No... I didn’t mean to... I’m sorry..!*” he croaked, unwittingly sinking his fingernails into her skin. The knight winced, surprised by the sudden pain, but it was nothing she couldn’t handle, so she soldiered on.

“Don’t worry... I’m here,” she whispered in his ear as his nightmares grew increasingly violent. “I won’t let anyone hurt you, you hear me?”

“*The screams... make them stop..!*” he begged, grinding his teeth so hard that the dragoon thought they’d *crack*. Burning patches of fur began growing all over his body, and Freya understood, much to her horror, that she was standing right next to a live bomb.

“*He’s about to go feral!*” she yelled, shooting a desperate look at the god, who had swiftly

abandoned his chair and rushed to her side.

“Not in my house,” he said, closing his eyes and performing a hand gesture that Freya found disturbingly familiar. His abandoned pipe suddenly went out, as if an unseen thief had stolen its fire, and the next thing she knew, the room had been plunged into an inky, impenetrable darkness. Only Gizamaluke remained visible, illuminated by the faint glow that radiated from his hand.

“A *Night* spell..!” the dragoon exclaimed, utterly bewildered. “You... you’re under *Reis’s protection..!*”

Gizamaluke chuckled, finding her ignorance endearing.

“... Alas, that was a *long* time ago,” he answered, a nostalgic glint in his eye. “*Now it’s the other way around...*”

Smiling, the god snapped his fingers, sending both Zidane and Freya into a deep, peaceful slumber.

April 2nd, 1820, Popos Heights, Burmecia

13:00

“Are you absolutely *positive* this is the place?” Brynhild worriedly asked, looking for a safe landing zone.

“*It better be..!*” Sigfred wheezed, barely able to sustain his airship-sized Vanish spell. “*I won’t... last much longer..!*”

“The message clearly spelled ‘*Popos Heights*’, so it *has to be*,” Fratley answered, as he unbuckled his seat belt. “Hang on in there Freddy! We’re almost done...”

Completely drenched in sweat, the bard sarcastically raised his thumb.

“Bryn, as soon as I set foot outside, get the heck out of here *quick*,” the knight ordered, grabbing his hiking backpack and halberd. “Come back tomorrow morning, I’ll be right here, waiting for you. If I don’t show up by noon...”

“We ain’t leaving you behind, okay? So *can it*,” the pilot huffed, earning an amused snort from Fratley. “... Are you sure this ‘*flaming*’ guy is worth the risk, though? Can’t we just go ask Queen Garnet what the hell is going on?”

“Oh, don’t be such a spoilsport! It will be *fun!*” the dragoon joked. “Besides, I’ve yet to regain Alexandria’s trust after my stint working for Ulrich.”

“Guys, could you *please* shut the hell up and *land?! I’m dying here!*” Sigfred spat.

“I have no idea why you care about those assholes’ opinion,” Brynhild said as she scanned the forest below for signs of trouble.

“Because we’ve just started a hopeless war against those assholes, and they’ve got *Eidolons* on their side,” the knight retorted.

“Fair enough...” she conceded as she carefully landed on a large clearing, pleasantly surprised by Fratley’s willingness to curse. “Alright, here we are... please be careful out there...”

“I will. Thanks, Bryn,” the knight replied as he made his way to the airlock.

As soon as the *Sidewinder* took to the skies, Fratley rushed for the relative safety of the forest. His plan was so simple that it didn’t even sound like one: Locating Amarant’s hideout without getting *murderized* along the way. Unfortunately, the threat

of roaming Grand Dragons made aerial reconnaissance a suicidal proposition, so he had no other choice than doing it on foot.

“Master Wulfweard... I won’t disappoint you this time,” he thought, deftly climbing a tree to avoid detection.

Being a Burmecian (and an experienced dragonslayer, at that) sometimes had its advantages. His previous trips to Popos Heights, both as a student and as an instructor, had left him with an extensive knowledge of its flora, fauna and topography. Despite the disappearance of the Mist, many unspeakable horrors still prowled the Gaian wilderness, so he kept an eye peeled for threats as he silently jumped from tree to tree, scanning the forest floor for clues of his quarry’s whereabouts.

A quiet, rattling noise alerted him to an unexpected presence, so he chose a tall branch as his perch and slowed his breathing to better blend in with his surroundings.

“What the..?” he thought, once the source of the sound became apparent: a lone lamia had ventured outside of the caverns that connected the plateau with what used to be Lord Gizamaluke’s temple. A particularly funny cautionary tale came to his mind,

so he bit back a chuckle to avoid blowing his cover and watched the serpentine abomination slither away, its shimmering scales reflecting the few sun rays that permeated the canopy.

krick... krick... SNAP!

Fratley gasped; the floor under the monster had suddenly collapsed under its weight, revealing a large spike pit.

STAB!

The lamia writhed and screeched in agony, trying desperately to pull itself out of the trap, but a row of downward-angled barbs prevented it from climbing out of the hole.

“Gnoll spike traps... primitive, but effective...”
said a voice somewhere behind him.

“Amarant..!” the knight whispered, feeling glad about getting ambushed for the first time in his life.
“I never thought I’d be happy to see you again!”

“What the hell are you doing here, traitor?”

34. Sanctum

“Trying to regain the chancellor’s favor, aren’t we?” Amarant asked, cracking a vicious smirk.

Fratley could almost *hear* the sharpness of his wrist-mounted blades.

“Actually, I’m here at Queen Garnet’s behest,” he answered. “Treno has attempted an invasion of Alexandria, and word is spreading about Burmecia’s involvement in the attack... Ulrich and Bishop are going to spark a new world war if no one stops them *now...*”

The dreadlocked giant seemed to hesitate for a moment.

“... So they’ve finally made their move...” he muttered to himself. “The question is: how can I trust you after what you’ve done?”

“Gizamaluke’s Grotto is guarded by some of the mightiest dragonslayers alive,” the knight countered. “... Don’t you think that if I wanted to capture you, I wouldn’t have come alone?”

“I don’t know... maybe you believe you can beat me on your own...” the bounty hunter retorted. “... You’re even dumber than your ex-wife, after all.”

Fratley took a deep breath before answering.

“Look, I’m not here to fight you,” he grunted, trying his best not to lose his cool. “All I want to know is *why* did Queen Garnet ask me to find yo—” the knight said, just before his ears perked up and he shot a worried glance at the sky.

“It’s coming right at us, isn’t it?” Amarant said, cracking a bloodthirsty grin.

The dragoon gulped.

“... That spike trap wasn’t only meant for catching lamias, wasn’t it..?”

“Nope.”

“Are you trying to get us ki-?!”

KER-CRACKK!

Before he could finish his sentence, the mercenary pulled him by the collar and jumped off the branch as the biggest dragon Fratley had ever seen smashed through the canopy, drawn by the death screams of the lamia.

“*An alpha..!*” the knight uttered, staring in awe at the majestic beast; its golden scales glimmered intensely under the sun, wreathing the monster in a glorious halo. “*Look at the size of that thing!*”

“Less chatting, more slaying!” Amarant cut him off, dropping him safely on the ground before launching himself toward his quarry.

WHAM!

The beast howled in pain as the bounty hunter punched its swollen abdomen so hard, it made the forest itself *tremble*. The dragon staggered, nearly losing its balance, but it firmly planted its claws on the ground and angled the mother of all death glares at its opponent.

Without giving the creature time to retaliate, Amarant concentrated his *chi* into his fist and released it as a blast, blowing up a sizable chunk of its flank

“Your turn!” the dreadlocked warrior exclaimed, dodging sideways as the dragon vomited a cloud of paralyzing toxins in their direction.

“Whoa!” Fratley exclaimed, climbing a tall oak in a single bound to avoid the deadly fumes.

Enraged, the beast roared skyward and the heavens themselves seemed to answer its call; a supernatural thunderstorm formed above the forest, forcing the knight to leap off his perch seconds before a lightning bolt, wide as a pillar, split the tree in half like a celestial guillotine. Amarant, rushed in, trying to get back into striking range, but the dragon was having none of it.

“Watch out!” the knight shouted, but it was too late.

KRA-KOOOM!

“*Amarant!*” Fratley yelled as the would-be dragonslayer disappeared in an impossibly bright flash. A direct Thundaga hit was a surefire death sentence, and he was going to make the creature *pay* for destroying his last chance to save the kingdom.

Wreathed in smoke and ash, the golden beast switched its attention back to the knight and opened its maw, intent on using its breath weapon again. Utterly frustrated, an irate Fratley stood his ground, aimed the palm of his hand at the monster, and activated his Dragon’s Crest.

“*Father Berlioz, give me strength!*” he roared. Purple lightning arced around him and the earth

cracked beneath his feet.

As the dragon spewed yet another rolling cloud of neurotoxins, Fratley unleashed the massive swarm of souls contained within the seal. Dozens of howling specters effortlessly dispersed the noxious fumes and punched a large hole in the beast's neck, nearly decapitating it.

"I'm not done with you yet!" the knight bellowed, activating his Crest a second time. Ghostly chains emerged from his hand and pierced the dragon's heart, violently ripping its spirit from its chest. Once Fratley finished absorbing its immortal essence, the beast wobbled and collapsed lifelessly on its side.

clap... clap... clap...

"Bravo..." Amarant commented, startling the dragonslayer; with all the mayhem going on, he hadn't noticed him comfortably sitting on a nearby branch overlooking the battlefield. "... And I thought *my* methods were barbaric."

"But how-? When-?"

Sporting a nasty smirk, the mercenary removed his bladed gauntlet and raised his middle finger at the dragonslayer, revealing Freya's old Coral Ring.

“*How in the six realms of Hel did you get that?!*” Fratley barked, fists clenched and incisors menacingly bared.

“Looks like I know your ex better than you...” the bounty hunter sneered, nonchalantly readjusting his clawed glove.

The blond knight gripped his halberd so hard that it nearly snapped like a twig.

“Y-You know what?! Fuck you and your gratuitous jerkassery!” he finally exploded. “Just tell me why I’m here, wasting time I don’t have with you!”

Amarant let out a gravelly laugh, his voice as rough as sandpaper.

“Relax ratboy, I’m just screwing with you,” he said, jumping off his perch and landing near the dead dragon. He picked up a wooden log that he had left next to a tree and proceeded to jam it into the reptile’s mouth. “I’m here doing a bit of research and also gearing up for a big job. I think you’ll find it *interesting...*”

The dragon knight blinked dumbly at him.

“... what kind of job?”

The mercenary didn't seem to acknowledge his question. Instead, he readied a haymaker and punched the beast so hard in the chin that it bit the log, causing its venom glands to squirt their contents all over the place. The knight winced, feeling almost sorry for the giant corpse. *Almost.*

"You know? You could have simply massaged the side of its head..."

Amarant craned an annoyed glance at him and went back to filling vial after vial with the poison dripping from the creature's wrecked mouth. The Burmecian threw up his hands and began walking away, unwilling to further waste his breath on him.

"You asked me what kind of job I have in mind..."

"Let me guess... killing more alphas and making a fortune in the black market," Fratley huffed.

"Oh, you mean by selling these?" the bounty hunter replied, raising one of the glass tubes. "Nah... these bad boys are just the means to an end..."

Fratley raised both eyebrows.

“... Just how many people are you planning to slaughter..?” he asked, horrified.

All of a sudden, the mercenary’s playful persona evaporated. Veiled by his scarlet mane, the stone-cold gaze of a killer pierced Fratley’s soul.

“Come... I’ll show you something interesting...”

April 2nd, 1820, Ginnungagap

Day:?

Freya blinked awake in the middle of a dark coniferous forest.

She was *standing*, as if she had fallen asleep on her feet, but she had no recollection of when or even *how* had she ended up in the woods.

“Freya..?”

She opened her eyes wide and turned around in disbelief; Zidane was cautiously looking at her from a distance, as if he feared she was just an illusion. Much to her surprise, he looked well groomed and

refreshed; the scruffy five o'clock shadow he had grown ever since the invasion was also inexplicably gone.

She gasped.

“Zidane..!” she exclaimed, quickly closing the gap between them. “You’re finally awake!”

The Genome recoiled, prompting her to stop approaching him.

“What do you mean *awake*? Where the hell are we?” he asked, nervously looking around. “Wait... is that Brahne’s armor you’re wearing?”

Freya snorted amusedly.

“Yeah... it’s kind of a long and *weird* story...” she answered.

“No shit...” he said, staring at Ginnungagap’s utterly *alien* sky with an eyebrow raised.

“Oh... guess I’ve *really* screwed everything up this time...” Zidane commented, eyes fixed on the small bonfire they had improvised more out of habit than necessity. In spite of Ginnungagap’s nice and

warm weather, nothing soothed the spirit of an old adventurer like the gentle crackle of the flames.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Freya reassured him, absently fiddling with the leaf between her elongated, calloused fingers. “We’re both cursed... damned since birth to lead violent lives and die as little more than the monsters we fight.”

The Genome snorted.

“You really know how to lighten the mood, huh?” he joked, playfully throwing a small pine cone at the knight which she caught in midair without even averting her gaze from the fire.

“That’s *your* darn job, monkey. I’m the pessimist here, remember?” she countered with a smirk.

“Entrusting your life *and* the future of Burmecia to a guy who has already tried to kill us once... who’s also the son of another guy who tried to kill us, just because he *said* he would help us...” Zidane enumerated. “... sounds like an awfully *optimistic* thing to do, don’t you think?”

Freya chuckled at the sheer absurdity of their situation.

“Well... I guess I just asked myself ‘*what would my bumbling simpleton of a dragon pal do?*’,” she retorted, gently tossing the pine cone back at her friend.

Zidane laughed.

“I’d give my tail for going back in time *just* to tell your snotty younger self that I’ve become your role model,” he said with a shit-eating grin.

“If you somehow find yourself in the past, please refrain from omitting the *bumbling simpleton* part,” she countered. “Lest you give young me a heart attack or something.”

“Deal,” the Genome concurred, sarcastically offering her a handshake. Much to his surprise, she rolled her eyes and humored him, thus sealing their ‘*agreement*’.

rustle... rustle...

“Huh..?” Freya uttered, turning her head and searching for the source of the sound with a twitchy ear.

“What is it?” Zidane asked, standing up and looking around.

“Something’s coming...” she answered, pulling a flaming branch out of the bonfire to use as a makeshift torch.

“Are you an ambush magnet or something?” he squawked, picking up a jagged, apple-sized rock and steeling himself for combat.

rustle... rustle...

“There!” the Burmecian exclaimed, pointing at a shadowy figure moving towards them.

“Gotcha!” the Genome exclaimed as he flung his stone at the silhouette with enough force to crack open a coconut.

TWHACK!

“OW!” the stranger yelled, losing his balance and hitting the floor like a sack of potatoes.

“*That voice..!*” the dragon knight exclaimed, rushing impulsively into the dark much to her friend’s bewilderment.

“*Freya, wait! It might be a trap!*” Zidane shouted, but she completely ignored him. “*Oh for fuck’s sake..!*” he spat, picking up another stone as he chased after her.

April 2nd, 1820, Popos Heights, Burmecia

13:45

“So this is where you’ve been hiding all along...” Fratley said as he entered Amarant’s shelter; a small mountain cave hidden deep into the woods, surrounded by a makeshift stockade and barely big enough for him to walk into standing up. It contained nothing but a small fire pit by the entrance, a rudimentary bed made of logs and sturdy branches, and a leather bag hanging from a protruding rock. “Cozy...”

“Jealous, farmboy?” the dreadlocked mercenary retorted with a smirk.

“I must admit I was starting to miss the thrill of the hunt,” the knight conceded.

Amarant slipped the venom vials into the hanging bag and pulled out a wrinkled roll of parchment.

“*This...* is why Garnet sent you here,” he said, holding up the scroll.

“What is it?” Fratley asked.

“Can’t tell you yet...” the giant answered. “You still haven’t earned my trust.”

The Burmecian rolled his eyes in exasperation. “And how should do I that?”

“I’ve heard rumors that your old bastard of a mentor has taken you under his wing once again,” the mercenary stated. “Even if I generally dislike your kind, the intel he shared with me not long ago proved invaluable in furthering my cause.”

Fratley sighed, having anticipated Amarant’s request.

“I’m afraid he won’t be able to vouch for my trustworthiness... not anymore...”

“Why?”

“Three days ago, Sir Wulfweard perished in a duel against Gunnar Ironhide, Ulrich’s top enforcer...” the knight explained. “I’m in charge of his unit now...”

Amarant’s face (or at least the portion of it that poked out from beneath his dense mane) slightly brightened up at the mention of Fratley’s squad, but he refrained from immediately wordng his thoughts, presumably out of respect for the dead.

“Oh... well, that’s a damn shame...” he said in an unusually solemn tone, catching the dragoon off-guard.

“Yeah...” he agreed, lowering his eyes to the ground.

“Alright... how about this?” the bounty hunter proposed. “Introduce me to your team. If I deem them worthy of my time, I’ll tell you what’s inside this scroll.”

“What if I refuse?” Fratley retorted, unimpressed. “Revealing their identities to a soldier of fortune doesn’t sound exactly like a wise choice.”

Amarant smirked.

“... Then you’ll miss the chance to hit Ulrich and Bishop where it hurts and cripple their war machine in a single night.”

Fratley raised both eyebrows at the giant’s statement.

“All right... you have my attention...”

April 2nd, 1820, Ginnungagap

Day:?

After stumbling in the dark for a while, Freya came across a semiconscious man in traditional Cleyrán garb, lying splayed on the forest floor.

“*Dad?!*” she exclaimed when she realized that their ‘stalker’ was none other than Fridgeir Crescent himself. “*Gods... it’s so good to see you! Are you okay..?*”

“*Ouch... nice throw, pumpkin...*” he croaked, giving her a shaky thumbs-up.

“Actually, that was me... I’m very, *very* sorry,” Zidane sheepishly chimed in, having finally found the two Burmecians.

Fridgeir glanced back and forth between his daughter and the Genome for a moment. Having already jumped to the wrong conclusion, he climbed to his feet and enthusiastically shook the king’s hand.

“You must be Fratley! Boy, I’m so glad to finally meet my son-in-law!”

An intensely awkward silence ensued as Freya's jaw dropped and Zidane's face contorted into the goofiest of grimaces.

"What..? Is it something I said..?" the spirit asked, giving the Genome a better look; his eyes gradually widened as he realized his mistake. "*Oh!* I'm so sorry, young man! I-I saw your t-tail and..!"

Zidane snorted.

"Don't you dare..!" the dragoon warned him, but he nevertheless burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. "*Stop it!*"

"GWAHAHAHA!"

"*Ugh...* dad... this is Zidane Tribal, king consort of Alexandria and fellow veteran of the Mist Wa—" she explained until the king's flailing tail accidentally smacked her across the face. "All right, that's quite enough!" she yelled, grabbing the apelike limb and giving it a strong pull.

"*Yowch!*" the Genome yelped, cradling his sore appendage. "That's real mature, Freya!"

"Zidane..? *The* Zidane..?!" Fridgeir mumbled, staring at him in awe.

“Accept no substitutes...” he joked, winking at him.

“I-I’m honored to meet you, sir!” the Cleyran stuttered, enthusiastically shaking Zidane’s hand.

Freya frowned; despite their lighthearted reunion, something just wasn’t right about her father’s behavior... or his all-too-convenient appearance.

“Dad... what are you doing all alone in the woods?” she asked, folding her arms. “Do you know this place?”

“Of course I do,” he proudly affirmed. “Right now, we are in the middle of *Myrkvidr*!”

“Myrkvidr...” she repeated, incredulous. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope,” the Cleyran cheerfully answered. “Isn’t it amazing, darling? The legends were true!”

“Umm, Freya..?” Zidane whispered, tapping the knight on the shoulder. “What the hell is he talking about..?”

“A mythical forest, hidden deep within the primordial abyss...” the knight explained. “We are in Mother Reis’s domain...”

As soon as she spoke the goddess' name, the ground beneath their feet began furiously shaking and cracking.

“*An earthquake..?!*” the Genome yelled, covering his ears to protect them from the deafening rumble.

Fridgeir smiled.

“That, my boy, is the sound of the biggest secret in all of Ginnungagap being revealed!” he stated, seemingly unaffected by the violent tremors.

KRA-KOOOM!

A few miles away from their location, a gargantuan tree erupted from the ground, rising gloriously above the forest until the enormous glowing crystal that adorned its crown was perfectly aligned with Berlioz's celestial realm, Fólkvangr.

“No way... no fucking way..!” Zidane exclaimed once the earth ceased trembling. “I-Isn't that..?”

“Yes...” Freya answered, feeling a lump in her throat. “That's Cleyra...”

Author's note:

I just wanted to say thanks to all the people who are still reading this story! I'm sorry for taking so long to update... lately I've been having almost no time for myself, but sharing this wonderful journey with you is one of my greatest sources of joy =)

I hope you're all doing well! Stay safe and have a nice week!

35. Heart of Darkness (Part 1)

“Dad, please, help me understand...” Freya asked as they traversed the forest toward Reis’s bastion. “Is that really Cleyra? How did we get here? And where’s Gizamaluke?”

“Whoa, relax, darling! One question at a time!” Fridgeir chuckled. “Reis is quite a nostalgic woman, so she shaped her hidden fortress like the old desert kingdom.”

“Yeah, nothing says hidden like a ginormous tree right under Berlioz’s nose...” Zidane muttered, glancing nervously at Folkvángr.

Freya craned an annoyed look at him and Fridgeir laughed, much to the Genome’s chagrin. *He had underestimated their super rat senses.*

“I guess you’ve got a point, young sir!” the ghost cheerfully exclaimed. “However, Lord Gizamaluke has taken great pains to shroud this forest with the mightiest illusory barriers imaginable. Combine that with Ginnungagap’s non-Euclidean geometries and the Allfather’s laziness, and you get the recipe for a perfect hideout.”

“... What’s ‘*Euclidean*’..?” Zidane asked.

“We’ve arrived!” the phantom proclaimed, happily avoiding the subject. The dense canopy gave way to a vast clearing and the winding roots of Cleyra came into view, large enough to rival Iifa’s. “Majestic, isn’t it?”

“Indeed...” Freya agreed, but her broken voice failed to dissimulate the storm that raged inside of her.

“What is it, darling?” Fridgeir asked, resting a hand on his daughter’s shoulder.

“Nothing... it’s just... this is where you grew up, isn’t it? Your hometown...”

“Heh heh... no, not really...” he answered, much to her surprise.

“What..?” she uttered. “I thought you were born here...”

“Yeah, but Grandpa Kain decided that I wouldn’t become an apt dragonslayer if he raised me among a bunch of... what did he call them..?”

“Tree-hugging pansies...” the knight recalled, holding back a chuckle.

“Yeah, right...” her father concurred. “... he was such a subtle old man...”

Freya snorted.

“Yeah...”

“You still blame yourself for what happened to Cleyra, don’t you?” Fridgeir asked, dropping his goofy demeanor.

His daughter lowered her eyes to the ground, letting her silence speak for her.

“Wanna know why did the sandstorm die out back then?” he asked, immediately getting her attention. “Reis... is dying.”

It took her almost five seconds to process such an outrageous statement.

“*What..? Why..?*” she muttered, shaken to the core.

“Because she’s an idealist, unwilling to tap into Berlioz’s power source due to moral and practical reasons,” Fridgeir answered. “However, energy deprivation ain’t a good thing for a goddess...”

“I thought the gods didn’t have to worry about stuff like that..!” Zidane commented, surprised.

“Where the hell are Berlioz’s powers coming from to make her prefer starving to death?”

“Dragons...” Freya stated. “That’s how he attained godhood; by stealing their souls and single-handedly driving them to near extinction.”

“Correct,” Fridgeir concurred. “The inherent horror of enslaving a being for eternity notwithstanding, Reis is right about Berlioz’s method being short-sighted: keeping Folkváng going requires an unfathomable amount of energy, and a soul has only so much juice. One day the dragons will die out, and the Field of Warriors with them.”

“Isn’t Berlioz aware of this?!” the Genome squawked. “Just how stubborn can he get..?”

“He *knows* that his time draws near, but change frightens him so much that he deludes himself into thinking he has the situation under control,” the ghost explained.

“How do you know all this..?” Freya interrupted him. “You told me Reis kept you in the dark about such matters...”

“Lord Gizamaluke convinced her to break her vow...” he answered. “He has a plan to save

everyone... and she has a big soft spot for her son.”

The wind whispering through the leaves filled the silence that grew between father and daughter.

“*The son of Reis..!*” Freya gasped, covering her mouth. “We’ve murdered her child..!”

Zidane gulped.

“Forget about it, no one blames you for that,” Fridgeir said, looking at Cleyra. “Right now, you only need to focus on overcoming Reis’s test.”

“Wait, test? What test?” the king asked.

“You both can’t control your power because you’re stuck in the past,” the spirit replied. “The fortress in front of you is a sentient entity. It will draw your darkest memories out of your mind and make you confront them as you make your way to the top. Only by making peace with them, you’ll find the path to salvation.”

Zidane and Freya exchanged glances and then stared at Reis’s stronghold, wondering what kind of horrors they would encounter within its walls.

“I dunno... I don’t think I’ll be able to forget some of the things I’ve been through...” the Genome sighed.

“Making peace with your past doesn’t mean pretending it didn’t happen,” the ghost said.

“I suppose you won’t be coming along, right..?” Freya ventured, a little disheartened.

Fridgeir offered her a bittersweet smile.

“Listen, Pumpkin... bringing a guide into the fortress is explicitly forbidden. It’s important that you two forge your own path,” he said, gently brushing her hair out of her eyes. “However, I’m allowed to intervene if you get overwhelmed, so you won’t be actually alone.”

“Will I see you again..? Once we reach the top...” she asked, closing her eyes to bask in the warmth of his touch.

“Of course! We owe ourselves a proper reunion!” the spirit agreed with a wink. “Maybe we can even throw a barbecue party and invite your royal buddy over.”

“Heh heh... you never change,” Freya sighed as she leaned in for a hug.

Fridgeir grinned, embracing his daughter tightly. Zidane stared at the scene for a moment in delighted

silence before wandering off to give them some space.

“I had no idea you were *that* close with your family,” the Genome broke the silence as Freya and him crossed the bridge that lead to Cleyra’s gate.

“Oh..? Yeah... I had a happy childhood,” she answered with the kind of smile that Zidane hadn’t seen on her face for years.

“I still can’t believe that guy’s your dad, though,” the king commented.

“And why’s that, if I may ask?” the knight retorted, a defiant glint in her eye.

“I dunno... he’s just so *bubbly*, talking about barbecues and calling you Pumpkin in the middle of the underworld,” he answered. “Just how many embarrassing nicknames do you have, by the way? I’m starting to think I don’t know you at all.”

“... That’s because I was only a child the last time we saw each other,” the dragoon somberly explained. “I started my training at the academy when I was eleven, and Sir Wulfweard took me in as

his apprentice shortly after. By the time I came back home as a knight, my parents were long gone...”

“*Shit...*” Zidane whispered, lowering his gaze. “I’m sorry, pal...”

The knight sniffed once and pulled herself together in the blink of an eye. She had gotten damn good at it.

“Don’t worry... it’s all in the past. Right now, I’m glad he’s safe with Reis.”

The Genome made a pause, knowing he was probably about to cross several lines at once.

“... Isn’t that odd, though?” he ventured, testing the waters.

“What do you mean?”

“Why did Reis preserve *him*, of all people?” Zidane pressed on. “Wasn’t he supposed to return to the Crystal, like the rest of Berlioz’s enemies?”

Freya stopped walking and angled a troubled look at her companion.

“Elaborate...” she asked.

“Look, I don’t mean to speak ill of your family or your gods, but I’m a *politician*, and I have a hard time dismissing Reis’s decision as a mere coincidence,” he explained, trying to phrase his thoughts as delicately as possible.

“What’s your hypothesis?”

“... I know this will sound crazy, but what if Reis and Gizamaluke have been grooming you to become their weapon against Berlioz since you were a kid?” he theorized. “Think about it: why would they have gone out of their way to *specifically* save your father’s soul from the Crystal if they hadn’t been planning to use him to manipulate you?”

“He’s not the only soul they’ve saved, remember?” she retorted, playing the devil’s advocate. “Gizamaluke rescued the whole Black Mage village, for example. We have no idea how many people they’ve brought back in secret, and my father could be just one of many.”

Zidane folded his arms and lowered his eyes.

“I dunno... I’m so used to dealing with scheming assholes that I can’t avoid feeling the whole Burmecian pantheon is trying to use you...” he said. “By the way, I didn’t mean your old man is

conspiring with them. I'm just worried they could be exploiting his gratitude to get to you."

Freya sighed.

"I appreciate your concern, Zidane, but right now we're out of options," she calmly stated. "The only way we'll piece together what's really going on is climbing this tree and listening to Reis's side of the story. Until then, wasting our time overthinking won't get us anywhere."

The king snorted.

"It ain't fun being paranoid alone, y'know?"

"Don't worry, I'm pretty sure we'll find plenty of entertainment once we cross that gate," she countered, pointing at the fortress' entrance.

"Oh, I got this one!"

Nimble as an ape, Zidane hopped onto a nearby platform and pulled a hidden lever. "Hail to the king, baby."

"Can't believe you remembered that..." the Burmecian remarked.

"Woman of little faith," the Genome nonchalantly countered, somersaulting his way back to her side.

The gates of Cleyra yawned open, revealing a corridor so dark that not even Freya could make out its end.

“Any ideas?” she asked.

Zidane walked past her.

“I have something better; skills!” he answered, producing a floating, glowing Terran rune with a wave of his hand.

“Neat! When did you learn to do that?”

“I’ve been experimenting a bit with Garnet’s help. Wish I could do flashier stuff than this without going nuts, though...” the Genome stated. “Ready to kick some ass?”

“Let’s do this...”

After stumbling around in the gloom for a while, the duo reached a vast area where a series of root-like structures and platforms formed a stairway of sorts. There was no ceiling to be seen, only darkness and silence.

“This is new...” Zidane remarked, hoisting their meager light source above his head. “Dammit, almost can’t see shit in here...”

Freya closed her eyes and listened to the way his voice reverberated throughout the chamber, roughly estimating its size.

“Looks like we’re in for a *very* long climb...” she sighed.

Her friend didn’t answer.

“Monkey-tail..?” she said, turning around only to find him staring at an empty spot.

“*Freya..!*” he whispered, pointing at a humanoid silhouette with glowing pupils that watched them from the shadows.

“What? What is it?”

“Look! There’s *something* there!” he hissed, exasperated.

“Where?!” she exclaimed, earning herself a flabbergasted glance from her friend.

“Don’t you see it?!” he answered, and then he started yelling at the shade, trying to provoke it into making a move. ‘*Hey, asshole! Show yourself!*’ he

shouted, but the creature retreated slowly into the dark until its eyes were no longer visible. “Shit... it’s gone...”

“Remember what we were told...” the knight remarked. “The fortress can *and will* turn our fears against us...”

“Geez, this is gonna be Memoria all over again, isn’t it?” he commented. “Hey... don’t you feel like we’ve been here before?”

“Well... this place certainly looks more like Iifa than Cleyra...” she answered.

“It’s giving me the creeps...” the Genome added, stepping on the bizarre, organic staircase. “C’mon, let’s see where this thing leads to.”

Thirty solid minutes of climbing later, Zidane stopped to catch his breath.

“Are you okay?” Freya asked.

“Yeah... just... need a minute...” the Genome wheezed, panting heavily. “Old age doesn’t come alone, y’know?”

“Well, I’ll be damned... Zidane Tribal just got winded walking up stairs!” she chuckled, patting him on the shoulder.

“Ha, ha... remind me to declare you *persona non grata* once we get back home...” he retorted, and then he noticed something moving out of the corner of his eye. Startled, he turned around and discovered their stalker perched atop another platform, watching them. “Geez, there it is again...”

Freya angled a look at the place he was staring at and, much to her surprise, this time she could clearly see the ominous, cat-eyed silhouette glaring at them.

“*I can see it too...*” she whispered, wishing she had a weapon.

“*What should we do?*” Zidane asked.

“*Hmm... Fridgeir said we would have to make peace with our demons in order to progress...*” the dragoon recalled. “*Maybe we should try being nice to that thing...*”

“*A friendly monster scenario, eh? Okay...*” the Genome muttered. “Hey pal! I’m sorry for what I said earlier! You scared the bejeezus outta me!”

Much to their surprise, the shade let out a high-pitched, malevolent, all-too-familiar chuckle.

“You need not worry, little brother...” the watcher said, stepping out of the shadows. “I see that your manners haven’t exactly improved.”

“*Kuja!*” Zidane exclaimed, nearly losing his footing at the sight of the silver-haired ghost.

“*You...*” Freya snarled, instinctively baring her teeth.

“What are you doing here?!” the king asked.

A large fracture appeared on the wall behind Kuja, rapidly growing across its surface until the gap was large enough for a person to fit through.

“Why don’t you follow me and find out?” the phantom proposed with a smirk as he disappeared through the strange portal.

“Hey! Get back here!” Zidane yelled with a broken voice, chasing after his brother much to Freya’s astonishment.

“Zidane, wait! It’s obviously a trap!” she shouted, attempting to intercept the Genome with a powerful leap, but his simian agility allowed him to seamlessly dive and roll out of her reach as he

continued his race to the door; his eyes were unnaturally misty, as if he had been placed under some kind of spell. “*What the..?! ZIDANE, NO!*”

Without a second thought, the Genome entered the portal, and the gap closed itself so fast that Freya almost crashed face-first into the wall.

“ZIDANE! ZIDANE, DO YOU HEAR ME?!” she yelled, desperately pounding the wall with her fists, but only the echo answered her screams. “ZIDAAANE!”

...

She was in trouble.

Not only had her friend impulsively left her to fend for herself against the power of the fortress, but he had taken with him their only light source, forcing her to rely on her other senses to navigate its impenetrable darkness.

“*Godsdammit, monkey..!*” she thought, closing her eyes to concentrate on her hearing, but Cleyra was so deathly silent that she could only hear her own heartbeat.

Suddenly, she picked up a quiet, rhythmic sound.

“*Footsteps...*” she deduced, trying to locate their source.

“I see you...” a voice whispered in her ear, startling her.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Freya exclaimed, her heart thundering in her chest.

A child’s laughter echoed across the chamber, further terrifying her.

“*It’s just an illusion... just an illusion...*” she repeated to herself, blindly stumbling in the dark as the footsteps drew closer and closer.

“... Just an illusion, you say?” the voice asked, and the question seemed to come directly from behind her.

Freya gasped and turned around, opening her eyes; a pair of dimly glowing pupils were staring back at her.

“W-What are you..? Stop! Don’t come any closer!” she exclaimed, backpedaling until her right foot touched the ledge of the platform. “*Dammit...*”

The creature stood still for a moment, as if it was mocking her pitiful attempt at fending it off.

“You want to know what I am?” it growled, every word a dagger. “I am the result of your betrayal!”

The silhouette started growing in size, accompanied by a sickening symphony of shifting flesh and snapping articulations, until its eyes were at the same level than Freya’s. A large Dragon’s Crest manifested upon its chest, its pale blue glow illuminating the entity’s features, and soon the knight understood which fragment of her past she was dealing with.

“Ulrich...”

“*YOU ABANDONED OUR PEOPLE TO DIE!*” the apparition howled, leaving behind a blazing trail as he pounced on Freya.

“*So fast..!*” she thought, assuming a defensive stance.

WHAM!

“*Unf..!*” the dragoon uttered as Ulrich recklessly tackled her, sending them both plummeting towards the bottom of the chamber.

“*WHERE WERE YOU IN OUR HOUR OF NEED?!*” he roared, seizing her by the neck in order to smash her head-first into the ground. “*WHERE*

WERE YOU WHEN ALEXANDRIA MURDERED MY FAMILY?!"

"Get off me... you miserable... hypocrite!" Freya croaked, elbowing his wrists to break free of his stranglehold, but he shrugged it off.

"You know why you can't hurt me?" he snarled, strengthening his grip on her throat. *"Because you keep rejecting your roots!"*

Freya glanced at the bottom of the chamber and estimated she had roughly seven seconds left before they hit the floor.

"HOW DARE YOU..." Ulrich bellowed as the knight slipped her hands between his wrists. *"... CALL YOURSELF... A BURMECIAN?!"*

"THIS IS FOR PUCK!" she yelled, digging her claws deep into his face. *"AND THIS... IS FOR WULFWEARD!"*

"Graaaaarghhh-!" Ulrich screamed in pain as the dragoon drove her thumbs into his eyes.

THUD!

36. Heart of Darkness (Part 2)

“HOW DARE YOU...” Ulrich bellowed as Freya slipped her hands between his wrists. *“... CALL YOURSELF... A BURMECIAN?!”*

“THIS IS FOR PUCK!” she yelled, sinking her claws deep into his face. *“AND THIS... IS FOR WULFWEARD!”*

“Graaaarghhh-!” Ulrich screamed in pain as the dragoon drove her thumbs into his eyes.

THUD!

When the brawling Burmecians hit the floor, it shattered like thin ice, revealing a bottomless pool of blood.

SPLASH!

“What the— Glrghh!” Freya gurgled as they sank into the viscous fluid. She tried to swim to the surface, but Ulrich grabbed her by the collar, pulling her into the gruesome depths. Desperate, she spun around and planted a savage haymaker square in his face, but he pushed her fist back with just the

strength of his neck until his empty eye sockets were staring directly into her soul.

“No wonder you can’t protect anyone...” the abomination’s voice telepathically rang in her mind as it morphed into a grotesque, eyeless Beatrix. *“How can you live with your own weakness, Crescent?”*

Freya screamed a stream of bubbles, utterly terrified. The pungent taste of copper caused her to clamp her jaw shut as the gory substance around her tried to force itself down her throat.

“Wanna know how your parents died, sweetie?” her shape-shifting torturer asked as she began to suffocate, this time assuming Frigg’s form. *“They drowned in their own blood as the dragons tore them to shreds... an appropriate death for a pair of heretics!”*

STAB!

The creature opened its mutilated eyes wide and gasped; *Freya had stabbed it in the throat with her mother’s pendant.*

“You don’t get to insult them, freak!” she snarled, overloading the trinket with the last of her spiritual energy until it glowed hot pink.

BOOOM!

“*GWHAK..!*” the impostor gurgled as the concentrated Cherry Blossom blast destroyed its head, causing it to let go of the knight. Without missing a beat, Freya kicked it in the chest with all her might, propelling herself upwards and sending the abomination down the chasm for good.

“*Almost there...*” she thought, swimming as fast as she could. With the last of her strength, she reached the surface and crawled out of the pond, coughing up blood.

“Thanks, mom...” she muttered, kissing the charred pendant before storing it in a leather pouch.

The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps brought her back to reality, and she realized that the scenery had changed; the giant wooden staircase had been replaced by a burning city, and hundreds of agonizing screams filled the air, reminding her of Necron’s hellish dimension.

“*Freya!*” A Burmecian woman in a dirty green dress yelled, running towards her with a baby in her arms. “Freya, is that you..?!”

“Britt..?” the knight gasped, surprised to encounter her childhood neighbor again. “What’s

going on? Where are we?”

“No time to explain! They’re co-!”

BLAST!

The lady shrieked as a fireball hit her in the back, disintegrating her and her child as their lifeless bodies fell to the floor.

“*Britt!*” Freya screamed, realizing that a full platoon of black mages was marching down the cobbled street, vaporizing anything that moved with their magic.

“KILL!” they boomed in a disturbing monotone, as if they were a single entity, aiming their spells at the knight.

Exhausted, outnumbered and cursing her luck, the dragoon ran for her life as the golems gave chase. She climbed a lamppost in a single bound and then jumped onto the rooftops as the fireballs whistled past her, setting the entire block ablaze. With a few powerful leaps, she found a small terrace far enough from the battlefield and stopped to catch her breath for a moment.

A distant explosion caught her attention.

Carefully, she approached the ledge of her perch, and as she watched the bloodbath unfolding below, she felt a part of herself die along with her people.

Burmecia was burning, and yet again, she could do nothing to stop it.

“I should have been here...” Freya mumbled, overcome by a heartrending sorrow. She leaned on the handrail, squeezed her eyes shut and let the tears flow, desperately wishing to wake up. *“If only I had stayed at my post, maybe Dan... and Britt...”*

“... There was nothing you could have done to save them,” an all-too familiar voice interrupted her, startling her so much that she almost fell off the roof.

“Dad..?!” she squeaked, whipping around. *“Is that really you..?”*

“In the flesh, hahah!” Fridgeir quipped, folding his arms. “How are you holding up, honey?”

“Terribly... I thought I’d be stronger, but there’s no way I can just close my eyes and make *this* go away...” she sighed, tiredly rubbing her face.

“Of course not. That would be ridiculous...”

“... Then *how* am I supposed to pass this test?” the knight asked with more than a hint of impatience in her voice.

“That’s where you’re (*understandably*) missing the point. This is not a test in the strict sense of the word.”

Freya raised both eyebrows at his statement.

“Huh..? What is it, then?”

“Think of it as an introspective journey... a pretty *lively* one,” he answered, smirking at his own joke. “The fortress isn’t actually trying to hurt you; it’s merely acting as a mirror of your soul.”

“Ugh... Am I *this* messed up..?” she groaned, rubbing her temples.

Fridgeir rested a hand on her shoulder.

“You’ve been through a lot, honey... far more than most people,” he said in a compassionate tone. “As long as you stay here, Reis’s magic will protect you from entering a Trance. A golden chance to untangle your past and reclaim your life, don’t you think?”

Freya lowered her eyes.

“But how..? I don’t even know where to start...”

The spirit smiled and took a few steps back.

“Remember when you tried to copy mum’s Rising Dragon technique?” he asked. “You wanted to climb a tree in one jump, but ended up flying right over it.”

Freya snorted, inwardly cringing at her child self’s recklessness.

“Yeah... then I crashed into another tree and got stuck upside down for a few minutes, wearing a dress to boot. Mom was *livid*...”

“... Now tell me, how did that experience affect you afterwards?” Fridgeir pressed on.

“Well... the other kids called me names for months, so I became pretty insecure about my skills,” she answered. “Then I failed my first academy admission exam because part of the obstacle course reminded me too much of the accident...”

“Do you remember how we worked through that fear?” her father asked, picking a spot and sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Freya's eyes widened as she put two and two together.

"Guess we should probably give it a shot..." she said as she sat facing him.

Father and daughter closed their eyes and slowed down their breathing.

"That's it... take deep, slow breaths. Inhale... exhale..." Fridgeir guided her. "Focus on your breathing... visualize the air flowing through your body..."

As Freya relaxed, the flames and the screaming began to subside. The burning city gradually vanished until just the two Burmecians and the terrace remained, floating in a vast, warm nothingness. With her father's guidance, the knight entered a state of heightened awareness, feeling every fiber of her body pulsing with life.

"Remember how we used to stargaze together?" the ghost softly spoke, adding his voice to the hypnotic rhythm of her respiration.

"*M-hmm...*" the knight affirmed, still in deep concentration.

“Good. Picture what you call the *Beast* as a constellation,” he answered. “Each star represents a painful memory, and together they keep you stuck in the past.”

As Freya visualized the scene, the void morphed into a beautiful starlit sky, crowned by a swarm of sickly, bloated red giants.

“Excellent job, you’ve singled out quite a few memories,” Fridgeir commented, contemplating the ominous star system. “Now, I want you to choose one and focus on it. Take your time.”

The dragoon’s brows furrowed as she made her pick and brought it to the foreground with the power of her mind.

“Good, good. Let’s take a look inside, shall we?” the spirit said, and his daughter obliged.

The blazing sphere opened up like a matryoshka doll, and a blinding light engulfed them, transporting them to a distant point in time and space.

“Oh my...” the spirit muttered to himself, recognizing the scenery of Freya’s remembrance.

“This is it... my greatest failure...” she said, opening her eyes.

WHAM!

“Oof!” a teenaged Zidane uttered as Beatrix’s technique sent him flying across the Burmecian throne room like a rag doll.

“Is that all you’ve got?” the Alexandrian general sneered, whipping around just in time to parry a young Freya’s spear.

CLANG!

“In the name of the king, I will cut you down!” the inexperienced dragoon snarled, teeth bared, glaring at the swordswoman through their interlocked blades.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep!” the holy knight guffawed, sending a Thunder Slash spell down Freya’s weapon.

“Rrghhhh..!” the Burmecian grunted, unable to let go of her electrified spear as the shock forced her to her knees.

“Stop hurting her!” Vivi yelled, casting a fiery curse at Beatrix.

“Don’t make me laugh...” the paladin sneered, effortlessly batting the fireball away with her sword.

“Beatrix, stop toying with them, we have work to do,” Queen Brahne boredly ordered. Kuja smirked, eager to gauge the general’s true power.

“At once, your majesty,” the paladin answered, bowing at the wannabe empress. Zidane saw her gesture as the closest thing to an opening he would ever find on her and went for the backstab, but Beatrix sensed him approaching.

“Heh. Fool...” she said, infusing her blade with a lethal dose of magic. Freya noticed it and pounced on her, spear in hand, trying to split the general’s attention.

“Guys, watch out!” Vivi yelled, realizing the attack was doomed to fail, but his friends had already stepped into the Alexandrian’s striking range and had no real chance to retreat.

“*On your knees!*” Beatrix roared, unleashing a gust of razor wind with a spinning slash.

SHRRRAAKKK!

A moment of silence ensued as the general calmly sheathed her sword. Zidane, Vivi and Freya staggered and collapsed on the floor like sandbags, severely injured by the air blast.

“Bravo!” Kuja exclaimed, sarcastically applauding the paladin’s *‘performance’*.

“How ridiculously weak...” she commented as the blood of her victims painted the floor red.

“Alright, that’s enough... I can’t take this anymore...” the real, older Freya said, averting her eyes, and everyone but her father and her froze in place, even Burmecia’s perpetual rain.

“Hmm... I think I’m beginning to understand how your mind works...” Fridgeir muttered, scratching his chin. “Tell me, Pumpkin: why did you describe this event as if it was *your* fault?”

“You’re kidding, right?” the dragoon said in disbelief.

“Not at all,” he answered in a dead serious tone, further confusing her. “Please, answer my question, honey.”

“I had godsdamn Queen Brahne in the palm of my hand!” his daughter exclaimed, *‘rewinding’* the scene until she reached the point where Beatrix seemingly got distracted. “Look! She was completely unprotected! Instead of picking a fight with Beatrix, I could have just thrown my spear at her and ended the Mist War right there!”

“And why didn’t you do that?”

Freya opened her mouth to speak, but the answer seemed to elude her.

“I... I don’t know... it didn’t occur to me at the time... perhaps I let fear get the best of me...” she said as her eyes welled up. “Guess my classmates were right all along... I don’t have what it takes to be a knight...”

“Hmph. Is that so?” Fridgeir said with a knowing smirk, fast-forwarding to the point where Beatrix noticed Zidane and prepared to kill him. “I think the actual reason behind your actions had nothing to do with cowardice...”

“Huh..?”

The spirit gestured at Freya’s young self, frozen in time while climbing to her feet with a determined glare on her face.

“Look at yourself! The moment you realized your friends were in danger, you threw yourself without hesitation at this killing machine of a woman to save them!” he pointed out with a smile. “What was Sir Wulfweard’s motto again?”

“Leave no one behind...” the dragoon recited, surprised by how well informed her father was. “Hold on a second, how could you possibly know that?”

Fridgeir laughed heartily.

“Oh, I’m actually pretty darn familiar with the old curmudgeon, mind you!” he exclaimed. “He’s always hated my guts for marrying his lifelong crush!”

“Wait, *what?!* ” Freya squawked. “He was in love with mom?!”

“Madly so!” the spirit exclaimed. “You have no idea how *bitter* he was when you were born... but then he met you, and you *changed him.*”

“Changed him..? How so?”

“That man loved you like a daughter, Pumpkin. In his own taciturn way, he wouldn’t stop gushing about how brave and noble you were, and how you were destined to greatness,” Fridgeir stated. “Now, do you seriously think that a Master Dragoon like him would have put his honor on the line by knighting you if he wasn’t absolutely convinced that you were cut out for the job?”

Freya averted her eyes, veiling her face with her disheveled platinum bangs.

“His faith in me was misplaced...” she said. “If I had heeded his advice and trained harder instead of losing five years of my life looking for a man who didn’t even remember me... maybe things would have turned out differently...”

“How is it fair to blame the outcome of a world war on a single soldier? *Especially* considering Brahne’s troops curbstomped *dozens* of veteran dragonslayers on their way to the palace?” Fridgeir riposted without ever losing his cool. “You’ve been telling yourself that you’re unworthy of your station for so long that you’ve twisted surviving the fall of Burmecia into being guilty of its destruction.”

The knight glared furiously at her father, no longer able to hold back the tears

“Don’t you get it?! If I had killed Brahne when I had the chance, Cleyra and the Burmecian refugees would have survived!” she yelled in an increasingly broken voice until she couldn’t scream anymore, and then she started sobbing. “Instead of that, everyone I knew is gone... my home, my family, my friends, my king, all gone... *I can’t protect anyone... I have*

failed everyone... I drove everyone away... even my Fratley... I can't... I just..."

As she began hyperventilating, Fridgeir walked up to her and embraced her tightly, halting her rant dead on its tracks.

"It's okay, honey, I'm here... let it out..." he whispered, stroking her hair.

"... *Forgive me... please... forgive me...*" she whimpered, crying on his shoulder.

"There's nothing to forgive..." he answered. "I'm proud of you, Freya, and I always will be..."

Father and daughter shared a moment of silence, giving the knight time to cool off and sort out her scrambled thoughts.

"... I don't know why did I say a few of the things I just said..." she muttered. "I mean... they felt true at the time, but now they just sound kinda silly..."

Fridgeir smiled triumphantly.

"Congratulations, you've just discovered what I like calling *stuck points*," he piped up. "They're extreme beliefs born from pain that skew our worldview without us even noticing.

“Am I... lying to myself..?”

“In a way, yes. Realizing we have them is the first step towards defusing them, which is the whole purpose of this exercise,” the ghost explained, returning to his spot to give Freya some space. “Listen to this statement: *If I had killed Brahne when I had the chance, Cleyra and the Burmecian refugees would have survived.*”

“Yeah..? I see nothing wrong with it...”

“Why are you so sure you actually had a chance?” the ghost retorted, pointing at the Alexandrian general. “Although it may seem like it, Beatrix never lowered her guard at all, and Kuja was staring right at you the whole time. A mage as powerful as him wouldn’t have let you hurt his pawn as long as she was still useful to him.”

“Hmm... maybe you’re right...” Freya conceded, and then she gasped. ‘*Kuja!*’ she exclaimed with her eyes wide open. “Dad, do you know where Zidane is? Last time I saw him, an illusive Kuja was leading him to some kind of portal!”

“What makes you think the Kuja you saw was an illusion?” Fridgeir asked.

The dragoon blinked dumbly at him, utterly astonished.

“What in the nine realms of Hel is that *monster* doing here?!”

“Let’s just call it... *community service*,” he answered in a notably scornful tone. “Don’t worry about your friend, he’s safe here, and Lord Gizamaluke is constantly monitoring Kuja. If he tries anything funny, he’ll go back to solitary confinement at once.”

“I don’t know... I don’t trust that *fiend* at all. I just can’t...”

“But he’s an integral part of Zidane’s hang-ups, and this is an ideal opportunity for him to get some closure and move on,” Fridgeir stated. “Now, what do you say we get back to work, Pumpkin? We still have a long way ahead of us.”

The knight sighed and wiped her eyes with her wrist.

“Okay...” she answered, resuming her meditation.

“Why did you bring me here?” Zidane asked, angling a blurry glare at his brother. “Do you still enjoy watching me suffer?”

The two Genomes were standing alone amidst the ruins of a mining village under a blood red sky. A howling gale mercilessly plowed the ground, kicking up swirling clouds of dust.

“If I wanted to make you suffer, I would have taken you to a far less peaceful place,” Kuja retorted. He hadn’t aged a day since the last time they had seen each other, but he sounded far more serene, if a little weary, and a subdued sorrow tinted his gaze, something that his brother couldn’t help but notice.

“Do you have *any idea* what happened here?” Zidane brusquely asked, balling up his fists. “Did you know that I can still hear the screams in my nightmares?”

“Of course I do. This is where you crushed the Trenoite army sixteen years ago, isn’t it?” the sorcerer answered. “That day, your body returned to the warmth of your palace, but a part of your mind remained here and never truly left.”

Zidane averted his eyes in shame.

“You’re well informed...” he muttered, feeling dirty. *A monster.*

“Reis’s power allows me to read your soul like an open book,” the silver-haired Genome explained. “It’s not like I need it, though; you’re still as obvious as ever. No offense.”

“*Tsk*. None taken, asshole,” his brother riposted. “Mind explaining what are you doing here?”

“A little bird told me you’ve been having... *control issues* for quite some time, and as fun as it sounds to let you go around mindlessly destroying everything you ever sought to protect, I wouldn’t like you to accidentally overshadow my life’s work,” Kuja stated, nonchalantly glancing at the smoking ruins. “What can I say? I hate sharing the spotlight.”

“Really? And here I was, thinking you missed me,” Zidane snarked back. “So, do you know how to... *uhh...* fix me?”

The angel of death raised a silver eyebrow.

“Well, I’d start by firing your tailor, brother. You look like a monkey in that outfit.”

“Oh, that’s fucking *rich* coming from the clown in the steel thong!”

“... Do you want my help or not?”

“I dunno, can you stop talking shit for a minute and help me?”

Kuja snorted.

“There’s only one way to find out,” he stated, levitating comfortably in the air. “When did your... *continence issues* begin?”

Zidane grimaced at him, then folded his arms and pondered the question for a while.

“I guess it all started four years after our last meeting...” he said, and the surrounding wasteland changed into Alexandria Castle’s garden, complete with the little kiosk where he used to spend quality time with his family.

“I remember this place...” the sorcerer stated, admiring the serene beauty of the scene.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” the king said, his voice filled with nostalgia. A ghostly version of Garnet calmly drank tea in the kiosk, oblivious to their presence. He limited himself to watching her in silence, a loving smile on his lips. “The first few months played out like a dream. We were young, madly in love, and nothing else seemed to matter.

We felt invincible, you know? I still remember waking up beside her in the morning and thinking that maybe, just maybe, we had finally earned our happily ever after.”

“... *T’is foolishness! If all were so easy, why, none would suffer in this world!*” Kuja recited, eliciting a chuckle from his brother.

“Saw that one coming a mile away. You’re in desperate need of new references,” the younger Genome retorted.

“Alas! I’d readily trade this dull eternity of mine for one last night at the theater, brother... guess we can call it *karmic justice*...” the wizard responded, and the king couldn’t help feeling sad for him.

“Seriously, now... what happened to you..?” Zidane asked. “Why are you here..?”

A hint of a genuine smile appeared on Kuja’s lips, but he was quick to conceal it.

“I know you enjoy a good story as much as I do, but let’s leave that one for another occasion, shall we?” he answered. “Tell me, why did your dream go sour?”

None too convinced, Zidane resumed his tale.

“Well... at the beginning few people wanted me around, being a peasant and all. I could handle it at first, but things really went downhill when Dagger’s secret got leaked,” he recalled.

“Her true identity.”

“Yup...” the king concurred. “The kingdom got immediately split between those who still supported her because of her achievements, and those who saw this as the perfect chance to kill us both and seize the throne.”

“How charming. I take it the traitors were... *pacified*, no?”

“Sorta. Those assholes grossly underestimated how popular and smart Dagger was,” Zidane stated. “Seeing themselves outnumbered and outmaneuvered, most of them fled to Treno, where they started plotting with the local separatists.”

“The Trenoite rebellion...”

“Bingo,” the king said. “May of 1803 was such a mess... a bunch of armed insurgents stormed Treno’s government palace and took the whole staff hostage, demanding independence from Alexandria. It was a fucking *bloodbath*, complete with a shitload of corpses littering the streets.”

“Oh, my... and how did our intrepid queen react?”

“She negotiated with them, ignoring the other nobles’ call for a military intervention,” Zidane explained. “Turns out the separatists were seen as freedom fighters by the Trenoite people, and they preferred going to war before paying taxes to a fake queen and her peasant husband.”

“Ouch...”

“Ouch, *indeed*,” the blond Genome concurred. “Dagger didn’t want another war, especially one fought in Alexandrian territory, and denying Treno its freedom was incompatible with her beliefs, so she made what’s easily the most polarizing decision in her entire career; she agreed to call an independence referendum in exchange for the hostages’ lives.”

“So cute.”

“That’s exactly what those smug-ass bastards thought,” Zidane stated, and thunder roared in the distance, mirroring his anger. “A year later we got wind of an invasion plot masterminded by the House of Bishop and financially backed by Dagger’s detractors. Apparently, they had mistaken her

goodwill for weakness and were preparing to try and seize the Zamo Basin by force for its natural resources.”

“Interesting. What did she do about it?”

“She militarized the border as a deterrent, which would have worked if Margaret Bishop hadn’t shown up with a whole damn battalion clad in Terran assault armor and a shitload of heavy magitek artillery, which *begs* the question...” the king explained, aiming an accusing finger at his brother. “Did you have anything to do with that?”

Kuja’s genuinely puzzled expression sent shivers down Zidane’s spine.

“Not that I know... my magical prowess alone trivializes such pitiful contraptions, and neither did my black mages need them, given their natural sturdiness and firepower.”

“What..? So they didn’t get ’em from you?” the king mumbled. “Then how..?”

“Careful, brother. There may be more players in this game than you know...” the sorcerer warned him. “*Zidane..? Hello? Anybody home?*” he jokingly said, but the king was thinking so hard that

it took him a few seconds to realize that he was being talked to.

“Oh! Sorry... it’s just... I seriously did *not* expect this turn of events...” he apologized. “It makes sense, though... a second Terran arms dealer would explain how Bishop got so much tech in so little time... the question is: *who’s this motherfucker and how do we find ’em?*”

“That’s *two* separate questions,” Kuja snarked. “Perhaps if we keep digging in your memories, the answer shall be revealed.”

“... Maybe you’re right.”

“So, Bishop brought this magically empowered army and invaded the Zamo Basin...”

“Oh, yeah... they broke through our defenses like they were made of paper and sacked a few villages on their way to the mythril mines, their primary objective,” Zidane explained. “Garnet and Beatrix decided to ambush them a few miles from here, but their air force wiped the floor with us and drove us back to this place...”

As he spoke, the Alexandrian castle dissapeared, replaced by the mining town’s ruins.

“You fought on the front lines. How bold.”

“I hated every second of it,” Zidane stated, lowering his eyes. “I can kill monsters left and right without breaking a sweat... but *people*? That fucks you up, man...”

“Why were you there? You’re merely the prince consort. Nobody expects you to lead the troops into battle.”

“I couldn’t just sit back and watch Garnet shoulder the burden alone! I had to protect her! I had to protect the kingdom!”

“Hmm... I see...” Kuja commented. “What happened before you lost control of your Trance form and destroyed this village?”

Zidane swallowed the lump in his throat.

“How do I put this...” he muttered, scratching the back of his head. “I kinda... *died*.”

37. Awaken

“Take cover!” General Beatrix yelled at the top of her lungs, her voice barely audible over the rumble of a Trenoite heavy bomber raining death from above.

KRA-KOOOM!

“Yaaargh! It burns! Help me! Help meee!” an unfortunate soldier shrieked, caught in the blast of an incendiary bomb.

“THERE ARE CIVILIANS DOWN HERE, YOU FUCKING ASSHOLES!” Zidane howled in a broken voice at the hulking behemoth of a warship. “Where the hell’s *our* cavalry?!”

“They’re trying to break the enemy siege, but it will take time! They’re too many!” the General answered.

“Dammit... if we don’t shoot that thing down quick, there will be no one left to rescue!” the king exclaimed. “Any ideas?”

Beatrix scanned the blasted town square, looking for a way to fend off the enemy airship.

“There!” she exclaimed, pointing at an abandoned anti-aircraft battery, manned by a badly mutilated corpse. “Lanna! Friede! Follow me!”

“Yes, ma’am!” the two Alexandrian soldiers answered.

“Please stay here until we come back, sir. It’s too dangerous out there,” Beatrix said, but Zidane was having none of it.

“Aw hell, no! I’m not staying put while you three risk your necks!” the Genome retorted. “Just tell me how can I help, and I’ll do my best.”

Beatrix opened her mouth to protest, but a stray bomb demolished the roof of the house they were hiding in, throwing any hopes of keeping the king safe out the window.

“All right... just keep your head low and try not to get shot, sir,” she sighed. “On the count of three. One... two... three!”

The squad raced across the ruins of the village, trying to get to the anti-air cannon unnoticed. Not far from there, the rest of Beatrix’s dwindling regiment fought a losing battle against Treno’s better equipped troops, trying to delay their advance until the trapped townsfolk could be evacuated.

“Friede! Lanna! Watch our backs! No one gets close to this gun, is that clear?” Beatrix ordered as she dragged the dead gunner away from his seat. “You wanted to help, sir? Now’s your chance.”

“Just tell me what to do and consider it done!” Zidane replied as he helped her lower the body to the ground.

“See those Firaga shells over there? Help me load them into the cannon.”

“Right away!” the Genome answered, loading a shell into the gun while Beatrix aimed for the rampaging bomber. “Ammo loaded!”

“Cover your ears!” the Paladin exclaimed before she pulled the trigger.

BOOOM!

“Holy shit!” the king squawked as he watched the magitek shell fly toward the ship.

KRA-KOOOW!

“Bullseye!” the paladin exclaimed triumphantly.

The flying fortress slowly turned around, angrily looking for a culprit; Beatrix’s shot had punched a

gaping hole in its fuselage, but the damage wasn't nearly enough to bring it down.

"Another!" the general ordered, aiming for the warship's left wing.

"Yes, ma'am!" Zidane answered, loading a second round into the cannon.

"Eat this!"

BOOOM!

KRA-KOOOW!

"Dammit!" Beatrix spat; while her shot had clearly hit the target, it hadn't slowed it down in the slightest, and she could see the ship's twin gatling guns revving up in anticipation, ready to unleash hell on them. "Here it comes!"

"Ammo loaded!" Zidane yelled.

"Die!"

BOOOM!

KER-KRACKK!

"Booyah!" the king cheered. The impact had destroyed the ship's left engine, setting the entire wing ablaze. A deep, cavernous rumble of burning

wood and twisted metal filled the air; the beast was in pain, but it would not go down without a fight.

“Why is it still coming?” Zidane yelled as he loaded a fourth round into the cannon. “Bea, why is it still coming?!”

“Everyone, get outta here!” Beatrix ordered as she aimed for the ship’s cockpit. “That bastard is mine!”

Before she could pull the trigger, the bomber unleashed the full power of its magitek guns on them, instantly tearing both Friede and Lanna to shreds, and ripping a good chunk of Beatrix’s left shoulder off, sending her tumbling to the ground.

“*Bea!*” Zidane shouted.

“*Nnnnnrgh!*” the paladin grunted, writhing in a pool of her own blood. “Run... please..!”

Refusing to leave her to die, the king took her place and pulled the trigger. Unfortunately, the cannon’s aim was off due to the ship’s movement and the shot missed the cockpit, destroying one of the gatling guns instead.

“Shit...”

SPAK!

“*ZIDANE!*” Beatrix screamed as the king fell on his back, fatally wounded by a bullet to the chest. Desperate, she dragged herself across the blood-soaked mud toward him while the warship victoriously flew past them.

“Oh, gods... oh, gods...” she mumbled as she removed the Genome’s mangled breastplate to assess his wound. “Sir, stay with me... please... stay with me...”

Bleeding profusely, Zidane craned a heavy-lidded stare at her.

“... sorry...” he croaked as he fell into a deathly sleep.

“No, no, no..!” the general muttered, pulling out an Elixir ampoule from her hip pouch and carefully pouring its contents down the gaping hole in his chest. “Your Majesty, please..! Gods... what have I done..?”

She waited for what seemed like an eternity for the concoction to take hold, but the damage was so grave that his heart was nothing but a gory paste smeared across his ribcage.

“Please...” she begged, pooling her remaining spiritual energy into a healing spell. She knew full

well that his condition was probably irreversible and that she was likely to incapacitate herself or worse by trying to bring him back, but she couldn't let her king die alone in the mud. She at least owed him that.

"A tragic end, fitting for a chronic martyr such as yourself..." Kuja commented, witnessing the scene from atop a house along with the real Zidane. "*if* you weren't too stubborn to stay dead, that is..."

"After I fell unconscious, I had a dream... a nightmare, in fact," his brother said, tiredly rubbing his eyes.

"... What was it about?"

Zidane squirmed on his perch, clearly uncomfortable with the subject.

"I... dreamed of Terra..." he sighed. "I saw... *things* that I couldn't possibly remember, yet they felt like memories... so vivid that I just *knew* my mind wasn't making it all up."

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad," Kuja commented.

"I... heard Garland's voice inside my head. He told me things... about my birth... about my

purpose...” Zidane recalled as his eyes reddened. “He said that this time around, he had made sure I would succeed where you failed... then the screaming began.”

“Screaming? You dreamed of Bran Bal’s destruction, perhaps?”

“Oh, I *wish* it had been just a dream. Watch this...” the king answered.

As soon as he closed his eyes, time resumed its flow in Zidane’s mental hellscape. Tongues of fire the size of a house devoured what was left of the town while the Trenoite howitzers rained fiery death upon the Alexandrian defenders. Beatrix silently cried as she cradled the king’s lifeless body, seemingly unaware of the bombs miraculously missing them.

Suddenly, the Genome’s fingers twitched.

“Y-Your majesty..?” the general stammered.

Without warning, Zidane’s eyelids opened, revealing a pair of glowing pupils carved into terrifying blood-red irises. The hole in his chest began sealing itself as the king rose to his feet, and with a glare he tore the sky asunder, opening a gate to the stars where the sun used to be.

“What the hell... is that..?” Beatrix mumbled, staring in horror as the gargantuan rift turned the day into night, plunging the valley into pitch-black darkness.

“No way...” Kuja uttered, sounding almost jealous.

Both the Trenoite and Alexandrian combatants stopped fighting and beheld the celestial vortex in awe, like oglops in the presence of a god.

“That day, I somehow tapped into the power that I was supposed to wield... almost became who I was supposed to be...” present-day Zidane somberly stated.

“Almost? What do you mean?” Kuja asked.

“Observe...”

KRA-KOOOM!

The air became thick with the scent of blood and the sound of screaming; a hailstorm of meteorites straight from outer space started raining all over the battlefield, turning into veritable bombs on impact.

“Your Majesty, no!” Beatrix yelled, trying to reach for the tranced Genome, but his incredibly

violent aura fried her nervous system and sent her crashing into a house like a bloody rag doll.

“Ouch... guess papa Garland wasn’t exaggerating,” Kuja commented in an amused tone.

“And you ain’t seen nothing yet,” his brother declared, pointing at the sky. “Look.”

The smirk on the sorcerer’s lips vanished once he noticed the colossal asteroid heading straight toward the portal.

“According to Professor Tot, may he rest in peace, that thing’s called Nemesis-118, and it’s almost one hundred twenty-five miles wide,” the Genome said. “More than enough to fuck up the entire continent in one go.”

“How did you stop *that* in time..?”

“Actually, I didn’t.”

A deafening roar drew Kuja’s attention away from the asteroid. “Wait, is that..?” he said, squinting at the familiar silhouette approaching the portal at breakneck speed.

“Hell yeah it is!” Zidane exclaimed.

Bahamut, the king of all dragons, fearlessly interposed himself between Gaia and the world-ending meteor. Staring death in the eye, the Eidolon opened its maw and unleashed his full power on Nemesis in the form of a massive energy beam, trying to push it away from the warp gate.

“*Zidane!*” Garnet yelled from the Wind Rose’s deck as the royal airship entered the battlefield. Without hesitation (or a parachute), she jumped off the still flying warship in Brahne’s old armor, *much to Steiner’s horror*, and landed safely near her husband with the help of a timely Float spell.

“I’m still clueless as to how did *you* seduce such a woman...” Kuja commented with a smirk.

“Honestly? I have no idea,” his brother conceded with a proud smile.

“Zidane! It’s over! You can stop now!” Garnet screamed, slowly but surely powering through the Genome’s aura thanks to her enchanted armor. “Honey, *please! Stop!*”

The tranced king didn’t even look at her. Instead, he pointed his index finger at Bahamut, cracked a sadistic grin and fired an *Ultima* spell at him.

KER-BOOOOM!

The queen grabbed her head as the Eidolon howled in agony through their psychic link, but despite the blinding pain, the dragon king endured the assault and resumed his attack on the incoming asteroid.

“Zid, it’s me, Garnet!” the Summoner yelled, trying her hardest to reach her husband’s wrist, but his deadly aura was nearly impenetrable, so strong that it was driving her feet into the ground.

“Just... a little... *further...*” she grunted. “Come on... *come on!*”

Tink... went the tip of her armored finger as it touched Zidane’s gauntlet. The Genome immediately craned a blazing glare at her and his energy field increased its violence *tenfold*, nearly sending her flying, but she managed to clutch his wrist before it happened and held onto him with a strength she didn’t know she had.

“*Zidaaaane!*” she screamed as her armor’s plates *cracked* under the immense pressure. “It’s me... Dagger..! Stop..!”

Something inside the Genome definitely stirred at the sound of her voice, because his eyes lost their

savage glow and his aura decreased its intensity until his wife found it bearable to be near him.

“It’s okay... you’re safe now...” she whispered in his ear, using the opportunity to embrace him tightly. “I love you... please, come back to me...”

As the king’s Trance receded, the hole in the sky began sealing itself until the sun blessed the land again with its rays, as if nothing had happened. Successful in his mission, Bahamut evaporated like morning dew, his debt toward Alexandria finally paid.

The Genome blinked awake and stared languidly at his wife’s visage as she lifted her damaged visor.

“Hi, honey...” Garnet greeted him, caressing his cheek with a gloved hand.

“... *Beautiful*...” Zidane croaked before passing out in her arms.

As the memory came to an end, the ruined town vanished, leaving both Genome brothers floating in a dark, infinite void.

“Alright, I believe I understand what needs to be done. Let’s start by turning on the lights,” Kuja said, and then he snapped his fingers. Like ink poured

into water, his magic swirled around them, weaving a gorgeous recreation of Lindblum on a lazy Sunday afternoon.

“The Theater District?” Zidane said, noticing that they were standing atop Tantalus’ old hideout.

“You were raised here, weren’t you?” his brother answered. “Figured that a peaceful setting would help you concentrate on your training.”

“Whoa, hold on, *training*? You sure you know what you’re doing?” the blond king asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “Don’t get me wrong, you may know how to juggle your cute little balls, but I’ve never seen you open a humongous portal to *outer space*. Maybe our powers don’t even work the same way.”

The sorcerer chuckled.

“I may not possess your raw magical reserves, but I’m an expert in Terran thaumaturgy,” he declared, producing a delicate, translucent rose out of nothing but spiritual energy. The flower then gracefully morphed into a butterfly and flittered away into the Lindblumese horizon.

“So... you’ll teach me party tricks?” Zidane joked, trying to get on his older brother’s nerves.

“No, I’ll teach you self-control, focus, discipline. Virtues that you obviously lack,” Kuja retorted in his ever arrogant tone. “Whatever power Garland implanted inside of you is way too dangerous to leave unattended. First, we’ll identify its true nature, then I’ll help you master it, if only to deny our maker any posthumous satisfaction.”

Zidane shrugged and folded his arms. “Alright, then... let’s do this.”

A few months later...

“I’m not sure I’m ready for this...” Freya sighed, standing in front of a grand, luxuriously decorated wooden gate.

“It’s understandable. Take as much time as you need,” Fridgeir said, nonchalantly leaning against the wall. “We could also get some rest, maybe grab a bite, and come back later when you feel like it.”

“... No...” she answered, balling up her fists. “The only way out of here lies behind that door, *and I’m done with this place...*”

Her father smirked proudly. “In that case, go get ’em, tigress!”

The dragon knight placed both of her hands on the double door, took a deep breath and entered the Burmecian Palace’s royal chamber with a mighty push.

Creeeaaaakkkkk

“I was starting to wonder if you’d ever show up,” a deep, raspy voice greeted her as she stepped into the dimly lit room.

“Ulrich...” she growled.

The chancellor was sitting in a chair next to the king’s bed. Puck slept peacefully, or so it seemed, under a Fang fur blanket, yet Freya knew that his bloodstream had been pumped full of dragon venom, and he would suffocate to death in a matter of minutes.

“It’s over, Ulrich. I know everything about the poison,” she said, a single tear rolling down her cheek, repeating word by word what she said to him on that fateful night. “In the name of the king, you’re under arrest for high treason.”

Ulrich snorted and then smiled at her.

“Freya, Freya... we don’t have to do this,” he said in a soothing tone. “You know I have nothing but the kingdom’s best interests in mind.”

“You’re deluded... out of control,” she answered. “I won’t say it again. Step away from the king and surrender yourself, or I’ll carry out your execution right here and now.”

Unimpressed, the chancellor rose to his feet. He seemed even more imposing in the half-light, the ruthless glint in his eye underscored by his powerful, muscular frame.

“Listen to me, Freya,” he said in a calm, yet menacing tone. “I find your loyalty to the crown admirable. For that, and for your exemplary service to the kingdom, I’m willing to forget this exchange ever happened and welcome you with open arms to my new, better Burmecia.”

“Your dream is doomed to fail,” the dragoon retorted, grabbing a halberd from the weapons rack on the wall. “Bishop doesn’t give a damn about our future, she’s only using you to get her revenge on Alexandria. Indulging her petty urges will only end up in tragedy for our people.”

The hulking Burmecian couldn't help raising his eyebrows at her statement.

"Who are you working for..?" he asked, dropping any pretense of civility as his Dragon's Crest wreathed him in a protective blue aura. "What exactly do you know?"

Freya raised her weapon in anticipation. "I know that vengeance won't bring our loved ones back," she said.

Ulrich bared his clenched teeth at her.

"... I'll rip out your insolent tongue!" he roared, lunging at the knight like an enraged beast.

"Not this time!" the knight exclaimed, hitting the chancellor over the head with a swift, yet devastating downwards hew.

TWHACK!

"Unf..!" the chancellor uttered, surprised to see his own blood on the floor; he hadn't expected someone as lithe as her to punch through his spirit armor without magical enhancements. "By the gods... you truly are the finest warrior this land has ever produced..."

“No...” she calmly answered, adopting an aggressive stance. “I’m just not afraid of you anymore.”

Ulrich smiled confidently and stood straight, towering above his opponent. Without breaking eye contact, he offered the knight a subtle, courteous bow before launching himself at blinding speed toward her in an attempt to negate her reach advantage.

“Too slow!” Freya shouted, somersaulting over his head as he missed his right hook and using the spinning motion to bury her halberd between his shoulder blades, sending him crashing into the weapons rack.

CLANG!

“Keh... heheheh...” Ulrich chuckled, picking up a poleaxe as he rose to his feet. “Guess it’s time to get serious...”

With unexpected gracefulness, the chancellor unleashed a flurry of flowing, circular hews, briefly putting Freya on the defensive due to his immense strength.

“Come on, show me what you’ve got!” he exclaimed. As his ego started getting the best of

him, his initially precise blows became increasingly sloppy, and when he launched a particularly careless diagonal slash, the far more experienced dragoon saw her chance to shut him down.

“Beware what you wish for!” the knight retorted, switching to a one-handed grip and deflecting his attack with a brutal upwards strike. Using her weapon’s momentum, she spun the halberd over her head and launched a killer diagonal cut, aiming for his neck, but Ulrich caught her polearm in his fist and snapped it in half like a twig.

“My apologies,” he said, throwing the broken halberd away. “I know exploiting our difference in magical power is most dishonorable, but I can’t afford to die. Not before my work is complete.”

Using the full power of his Crest, the chancellor closed the gap between them in the blink of an eye.

“Goodbye, Crescent...” he snarled, swinging his poleaxe at her neck, too fast for her to react beyond instinctively closing her eyes.

“We both know how this ends...” a familiar voice filled the room, seemingly coming from everywhere at once. **“But we could change that, if you’d just let me do my job...”**

Freya opened her eyes; time had slowed down to a crawl around her, and Ulrich was frozen in place with a murderous grin plastered on his face.

“... I wasn’t expecting to meet you again. Not here at least,” she answered, having recognized the Beast’s chilling presence despite not being able to see it. “If you’re here to tell me that I can’t get anything done without your help, you’re wasting your time.”

“I don’t need to. You just admitted it without my input,” the entity sneered.

“Exactly.”

Even if she couldn’t see it, the knight felt that the Beast had just done a double take.

“... You know? At first I thought you were some kind of evil, mind-hijacking demon... actually, I spent an embarrassing amount of time believing that,” she pressed on, smirking at her own choice of words. “But now I’ve come to understand what you truly are.”

“... Enlighten me.”

“You’re a part of me... my fighting spirit, my will to survive, and even if you can be a nasty piece

of work at times, I'd like to apologize for treating you... *us*... like dirt. I don't want to hate myself anymore."

The presence remained silent for a moment, unused to this kind of acceptance.

"... What exactly do you propose?"

"Let's work together, like in the old days," the dragoon answered. "United we can beat this creep, save our homeland and reclaim our life."

"... Can't deny I would enjoy kicking his teeth in..."

"Heheh... that's the spirit!" the knight concurred. "Look, I can't promise things will work out smoothly from the get-go, but y'know? I have a good feeling about this."

The Beast pondered her plan one more time before making its choice.

"... Hmph... don't screw this up," it said as it lent its might to the dragoon. **"I'll be watching..."**

"You won't be disappointed," Freya answered as time began to flow.

CRACK!

“Huh..?! But when..?!” Ulrich blurted out, looking at his weapon in utter disbelief; the knight had returned the favor by chopping his poleaxe in half with the edge of her hand. Her skin, claws and teeth had turned into white-hot steel, and a shimmering haze wreathed her, distorting the light passing through it like a powerful lens.

“You may start running now...” she growled.

BLAM!

“Oof..!” the chancellor uttered as Freya’s deadly left hook threw him off-balance, leaving a large gash on his cheek. Enraged, he tackled the dragoon, lifted her off her feet and slammed her into a wall like a charging bull.

“Is that all you’ve got?!” she barked, surprising him with a headbutt followed by a brutal uppercut that sent him flying through the roof. With a powerful jump, she chased him into the skies, cleaving a path through the rain like a shooting star.

“Enough!” Ulrich roared, summoning all the dragon souls trapped into his Crest at once. A hundred howling wraiths emerged from his flesh and homed in on the knight, intent on tearing her apart limb from limb.

With a swift move, Freya pulled the Crescent pendant out of her pouch and loaded it with every single drop of energy left in her body.

“THIS ENDS NOW!” she roared as she unleashed the mightiest Cherry Blossom spell ever seen, cutting a blazing swathe through the phantom swarm like a comet in the solar wind.

“Amazing...” Ulrich muttered, watching his last line of defense crumble and burn to ash before his very eyes. “You are finally ready...”

A blinding explosion set the skies ablaze.

...

...

...

“Oh shit, I think she’s waking up!”

“Huh..? Zidane..?”

“Freya, my dear, can you hear me?”

“Dad..?”

“That’s right! Welcome back, Pumpkin!”

Laboriously, the knight opened her eyes and found herself in a humble, yet cozy wooden house. Massive branches, wide as tree trunks, acted as the structure's support beams, and the morning sun seeped into the room through a large window next to her bed.

“Wakey wakey, lazy bum,” Zidane greeted her with a bright grin plastered on his face.

“*Ohhh, the nerve of you..!*” she yawned as she stretched out, feeling unusually refreshed. “Where are we now? Are we still in the fortress?”

“Errr... yes and no... but mostly yes,” Fridgeir answered, pointing at the window. “Why don’t you see it for yourself?”

Not knowing what to expect anymore, Freya sat up and peeked outside. “Holy mother of...” she exclaimed, unable to believe her eyes. “Are we where I think we are?”

“Indeed!” her father proudly declared. “Welcome back to Cleyra!”

38. Eternal Harvest

Author's note:

This is a somewhat *musical* chapter, so if you've never heard about the songs mentioned below, I strongly recommend you look them up on Youtube.

Enjoy! :)

Albeit there were many stunning sights on Gaia, few rivaled the bucolic splendor of the *City of Illusion*, as Cleyra had been often dubbed. Without the massive sandstorm swirling around the tree, every corner of the settlement offered a magnificent view of the vast forest below. An artificial sun shone bright above Reis's domain, while a few fluffy clouds lazily drifted by, emulating a peaceful spring morning.

"Are we in a memory..?" Freya asked her father as they climbed a staircase carved into a massive branch. She had reluctantly left Garnet's armor in her room at his behest, but she couldn't shake off the

feeling that something terrible was about to happen. “Please don’t tell me we’re reliving *that* day...”

“*Heheh*, relax. No more memories, I promise,” Fridgeir dismissed her concerns. “The goddess built this place in secret centuries ago. A haven for those rejected by Berlioz and his church.”

“So, if you’re Burmecian or Cleyran, and you don’t have a Dragon’s Crest, your soul ends up here?” Zidane ventured.

“Not necessarily, but you’re almost always offered the choice,” the spirit answered. “Besides, ever since Lord Gizamaluke arrived, this place has been taking in more than just our kin.”

“The black mages,” Freya said.

“... And Kuja,” Zidane somberly added, making the knight wonder what had happened between the brothers inside the fortress.

“... Right,” Fridgeir reluctantly concurred, trying to avoid the subject.

As they reached the residential area of the city, the trio began encountering small groups of spirits along the way, going about their business without a care in the world.

“Gods... I know some of these people...” Freya commented, trying not to gawk at the ghosts. “Isn’t that..?”

“Oh, you remember Mrs. Algar?” her father chuckled, gesturing towards a portly lady tending to her garden. “I’m surprised! You were just a kid when she passed away. Poor woman.”

“*Lady Freya! Lady Freya!*” three Burmecian children cheerfully greeted her.

“Oh, hi, little ones..!” she meekly replied, awkwardly waving her hand; even if they meant her no harm, merely looking at their translucent forms greatly disturbed her.

“Wanna play hide and seek?”

“Is Mr. Fratley with you?”

“Are you gonna stay with us?”

“Whoa, slow down, youngsters!” Fridgeir came to her aid. “Lady Freya has come a *looong* way from home and still needs some time to recover. Why don’t you go tell Mr. Gizamaluke to meet us at the mead hall? He’ll be happy to see his old friend again!”

“Okay!” the three little rodents exclaimed, leaving in a hurry.

“Mead hall, eh?” Zidane said, cocking an eyebrow. “I could *really* use a beer right now... or three...”

The spirit snorted.

“This way,” he said.

After a short walk, the trio reached a large gable-roofed building, which Freya promptly recognized as a Burmecian-styled mead hall. Muffled laughter, chatter and music came from inside, but she couldn’t quite make out the melody due to all the ambient noise.

“Ooh, sounds like someone’s having fun!” Zidane commented.

“That’s because we’re celebrating the Harvest Feast!” Fridgeir explained as he banged on the door thrice. “Just because we live in a timeless dimension doesn’t mean we can’t find excuses to party!”

After a moment, the gate creaked open, revealing a short, brown-haired Burmecian in casual clothes

standing on the other side with a flabbergasted look on his face.

Freya felt her legs *tremble*; she wasn't expecting to meet *him*. Not in Reis's realm, at least.

"P-Puck..?" she stammered, unable to stop the tears from welling up in her eyes. "Puck is that you..?"

"Holy shit..! *Freya..?*" the late king said, slowly approaching her as if *she* was the ghost. All of a sudden, he burst out into a fit of ecstatic, almost manic laughter, so contagious that even the dragoon started laughing. "*I knew it! I knew you'd make it! Gwahahahah!*"

"Gods, it's so nice to see you again!" the knight exclaimed. "What are *you* doing here? I thought you were in Fólkvangr, like all Spears of Berlioz!"

"Meh, guess I'm too cool for his lame-ass club!" he huffed. "Speaking of clubs, you absolutely need to come drink with us! Cleyran beer may be bland as *fuck*, but you'll love the company!"

"Hey! It's the drink of my people you're dissing!" Fridgeir jokingly complained.

“What? You know I’m right!” Puck countered. “Besides, you’re not even fully Cleyran so shut it and get yo’ ass in here.”

Zidane snorted, drawing the diminutive king’s attention. “Oh my fucking gods, Zidane?!”

“Long time no see, shrimp,” the Genome answered.

“*Shrimp?! Have you looked in the mirror lately, banana breath?!* ”

“*Banana breath? C’mon pal, you’re losing your edge,*” Zidane joked, opening his arms.

Much to the Crescents’ amusement, both kings performed their fabled ‘*royal salute*’, which consisted in a chest bump followed by a playful tug-o-war handshake.

“Seriously now, tell me you didn’t kick the bucket too, pal...” the ghost said.

“I would have, if it wasn’t for Freya dragging my ass all the way from Alexandria to save me,” the Genome answered, winking at the knight.

“She’s still babysitting you, huh?” Puck snarked. “Alright, enough chatter! Come on in, guys! First round’s on me!”

“It’s a free bar,” Fridgeir pointed out.

“*Heheh*, right. Force of habit,” the short king conceded.

When Freya entered the mead hall, she paused for a moment to assimilate the scene unfurling before her; A bard ensemble played catchy tunes, singing with angelic voices while a crowd of spirits danced and laughed between two long rows of tables, each brimming with mouth-watering delicacies. Candles, torches and a large central fireplace painted the room in glorious golden hues, and the air was thick with the intoxicating aroma of traditional Burmecian cuisine.

“Gods... this place smells like home...” the dragoon muttered, soaking in the cozy ambience.

“I haven’t seen one of these in decades...” Zidane added, excitedly looking around like a child in a candy shop.

“Amazing, huh? Never gets old,” Puck concurred, gesturing towards the far end of the hall. “I was going to introduce you, but I guess you already know my drinking buddy!”

Freya gasped and covered her mouth; none other than Sir Wulfweard himself was sitting at Puck's table, smiling and waving at her as if nothing had ever happened. Moved to tears, she crossed the hall in a few quick strides and embraced the old man, catching him completely off guard.

"Oh! Hi, Cherry..." he said, awkwardly patting her on the back.

"Hi, sir..." she whispered in return.

"... Hey, why didn't I get one of those?!" Puck jokingly complained.

"To be honest, I had no idea she even *knew* how to hug before the night this guy showed up," Zidane added, glancing at the colonel.

"Really? I mean, she used to be the sweetest cuddle bug *ever* when she was a kid," Fridgeir unironically commented, causing the two kings to snort.

"Oh, cut it out, you three!" Freya squawked, rolling her eyes as she broke the embrace. "What are *you*, of all people, doing here, sir..?"

"I, umm... accepted an honorable challenge from an old colleague, and lost despite cheating *thrice* to

even the odds,” Wulfweard answered. “Guess the Allfather isn’t a fan of pragmatists. Or losers.”

“Aw, c’mon Wulfie, at least you saved Siggie’s ass,” Puck chimed in, patting him on the back. “Besides, without Gunnar to lead them, Ulrich’s enforcers will need time to regroup. A perfect chance to hit him and Bishop right where it hurts.”

“What do you mean?” the dragon knight asked, raising an eyebrow.

“We’re going to cut their supply chain,” the ghost king answered, pouring everyone a drink. “Please, take a seat. Wulf?”

Freya, Zidane and Fridgeir obliged. Wulfweard sighed.

“As much as I hate interrupting this reunion to talk business, there’s something you two need to know,” he said. “I assume you remember your old comrade, Amarant Coral...”

“Seven feet tall, blue skin, perpetually pissed... yup, he’s kinda hard to miss,” Zidane commented, making a pause to finish his pint. “*Ahhh... that hits the spot...*”

“I haven’t seen him in years...” Freya said, averting her eyes; the emotional scars left by her final showdown with Lani were still quite fresh. “Last time we met, he was planning to go on a dragon hunting trip, so I lent him the Coral Ring and he disappeared with it, never to return.”

“Yeah, well, he’s back, and now he’s working for Regent Cid of Lindblum,” the colonel stated. “He’s offering the Partisans valuable intel on Ulrich and Bishop in exchange for their help.”

“What kind of help does he need?” the Genome asked.

“He came to our kingdom investigating a series of seemingly disconnected abductions. One of the victims is his own partner, Lani, so the whole affair is rather personal for him,” Wulfweard explained. “Turns out there *was* a pattern after all, and he followed the trail to Iron Mountain, a supposedly abandoned mining complex near Vube Desert, deep into monster territory.”

“Wait, abductions..?” the blond king cut in; he already didn’t like where Wulf’s story was going. “Who’s gone missing..?”

“Lindblumese beggars, orphans, prostitutes... easy pickings,” the colonel listed, lowering his snowy head. “Someone’s been preying on them for a while, and Cid suspects Bishop and Ulrich are behind the kidnappings.”

“The soul cores...” Freya muttered, craning an utterly heartbroken stare at the Genome. “Oh gods, Zidane... *the soul cores..!*”

Zidane covered his mouth, paralyzed by a mixture of sheer, undiluted hatred and horror.

“I’m gonna kill them...” he said, at first in a barely audible voice, but then he started screaming. “*I’m gonna fucking kill them!*”

A tense silence overtook the hall as the spirits alarmedly turned their heads towards him.

“... *Buddy, I understand how you feel, but you’re gonna get us all kicked to the curb...*” Puck whispered in his ear.

“How do you know all this..?” Freya asked once the crowd resumed their partying.

“A spirit anchor, just like your mother’s pendant,” Wulfweard explained, handing her his wooden mug. “What do you see in there?”

“... If I’d known this was possible, I’d have become a fortune teller decades ago,” she joked, realizing that he had enchanted his beer (creating what could only be described as a *drunken crystal ball*) to scry on Fratley and Amarant. The two of them were discussing some kind of plan with the other Partisans in a small room. “I’ve never seen those two getting along so well... they’re planning to storm Iron Mountain, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, and looks like Amarant’s latest ‘hobby’ will prove to be Ulrich’s undoing,” Puck stated. “See those purple vials on the table? *That’s pure, liquid irony.*”

“Grand Dragon venom. Deadly at high concentrations, easily aerosolized, a small dose makes for an amazing incapacitating agent,” Wulfweard detailed. “The complex’s tight security makes it pretty hard to infiltrate...”

“... Unless you pump the vents full of knockout gas,” Zidane completed his sentence. “Do you think they’re... *processing* the victims in there..?”

“We only know two things about that place: people come in, and black mages come out,” the colonel stated. “Whatever’s happening in Iron Mountain, it needs to be stopped at once.”

A gloomy silence grew between them, only interrupted by the occasional drinking.

“Alright, *fuck it*,” Fridgeir spat, angrily planting his mug on the table.

“What’s gotten into you, dad..?” his daughter asked, shooting a surprised look at him.

“It’s just... *argh! I’m so frustrated..!*” he exclaimed, glaring daggers at Puck and Wulfweard. “This was supposed to be a welcome party! A relaxing moment after months of hard work and suffering! Why you, *killjoys*, had to start with the bad news?!”

“*Uh... right...*” Wulfweard muttered, averting his eyes. “... I’m sorry.”

“... Me too...” Puck sighed.

“It’s okay, guys,” Freya intervened. “The world sucks, that’s nothing new, but hey! We’re finally reunited in a lovely place, with great food, great music, and my mug keeps magically refilling itself. Maybe we should focus on that.”

The rest of the table laughed at her joke.

“Heh heh, fair enough,” the colonel conceded.

A cheerful fiddle riff heralded a classic tavern song, and both Freya and Puck's ears instantly perked up.

"Ooooh! *I've been a wild rover for many's the yeeear,*" she started singing with a tipsy grin plastered on her face.

"... *and I've spent all me money on whiskey and beeer!*" the short king excitedly answered. "Man, I love this song!"

"*But now I'm returning with gold in great stooore,*" Zidane joined in, gleefully raising his mug.

"*And I swear I will play the wild rover no mooore!*" Fridgeir completed the verse, summoning a mandolin out of thin air.

"*And it's nooo, nay, never!*" the whole mead hall sang along. "*No, nay, never, no mooore!*"

"C'mon, Wulf!" Puck exclaimed, pointing his finger at him.

"... *Will I play the wild rover... no, never, no more...*" he reluctantly obliged, prompting both his student and his rival in love to cheer and pat him on the back.

The bards began playing a febrile jig, and most of the ghostly patrons abandoned their chairs and started dancing like the world was ending.

“They know *River Wide* in the afterlife?!” Freya squeaked, immediately springing to her feet. “Dunno about you, gentlemen, but I’m not staying here a second longer!”

“Wooo! Let’s show ’em how it’s done!” Fridgeir said as he followed her, mandolin in hand.

Father and daughter, both gifted dancers, exchanged graceful bows, and then proceeded to tear the dance floor to shreds, drawing sighs from the audience with every move.

“*Fratley... you lucky bastard...*” Puck accidentally thought out loud, earning himself a wide-eyed stare from Zidane. With his pride on the line, he raised the stakes. “... *What?* Aw, c’mon, can’t a dude enjoy the scenery?”

Wulfweard cast an amused glance at him.

“You know, she’s been divorced for almost a year now...” the colonel commented, mostly to see how he would react.

“So... what are you waiting for?” Zidane challenged him, sporting the most infuriating smirk ever.

“What? Naw, I... I dunno, man... won’t it be... *weird?*” Puck nervously stammered. “Besides, she hasn’t seen Fridgey in, like, *forever*... I don’t wanna spoil their moment.”

“Dude, it’s just *dancing*,” the Genome snorted, abandoning his chair to forcibly pull Puck to his feet. “C’mon, buddy, you only live once... or *twice*, in your case.”

“... *The fuck, man?! Whoa! Chill, chill!*” he squeaked as Zidane pushed him onto the dance floor. “Oh shit, oh, shit, oh SHIT!” he exclaimed, miraculously skidding to a halt before crashing into Freya. “Hey... *’sup?*”

The knight deviously smirked, hooked her arm through his before he could react, and took him square-dancing with the other couples, much to everyone’s amusement.

“Look at ’em go! *Woooo!*” Zidane cheered, enthusiastically clapping and whistling.

“*Holy shi-! WHOA!*” Puck blurted out as the knight spun him around like a top.

“A little rusty, aren’t we?” the dragoon playfully teased him.

“Hey, I haven’t tripped over my own feet yet! I call that *improvement!*” the king retorted, and the knight chuckled.

The jig eventually died out, transitioning into a slow, romantic folk song, much to Puck’s chagrin.

“Wait, is that *Wild Mountain Thyme*..? What are you trying to do, kill us with cringe?” he squawked, trying to mask his intense discomfort with more of his ineffectual bravado. Freya saw right through his bluff, and far from shying out, she pulled him into a close embrace, causing his pulse to skyrocket.

“Uhh, Freya..? What are you doing..?”

“What? Weren’t you complaining about not getting a hug five minutes ago, *Your Majesty?*” she whispered in his ear, leading him so smoothly, so gently, that he forgot how to *speak*. A melancholic smile eventually blossomed on Puck’s lips.

“I thought I’d never see you again...” he muttered, feeling a lump in his throat. “Even this place feels lonely without my favorite knight...”

“And Burmecia feels like a tomb without your terrible jokes...” she sighed, resting her chin on his shoulder. “... how are we supposed to go on without your guidance..? The kingdom’s on the brink of destruction... everyone expects so much from me... I... I’m scared to go home...”

The king craned a perplexed stare at her, but she averted her eyes.

“Freya... there’s *no one* I’d rather entrust our future to than *you*,” he declared, eliciting a confused look from her.

“But why *me*..?” she asked. “For all intents and purposes, I’m just a glorified bodyguard...”

“Are you kidding me..? *You’re so much more than that!*” the king exasperatedly exclaimed. “You saved the freaking world! You’re ***the*** symbol of victory against impossible odds for our people! If someone can rally the clans and unite Burmecia, that’s you!”

“But I have no idea how to lead a country!” she answered. “What if our people starve because of me?”

“They won’t!” he countered. “You’re as sharp as you are brave, every muscle in your body is a

weapon, even *Ulrich* admires you, and your heart is *always* in the right place. If there's someone out there I'd gladly follow to kingdom come... that would be you."

Humbled beyond words, Freya replied with a blurry-eyed smile, and Puck thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"*Holy fuck... I think she's actually gonna go for it...*" a wide-eyed Zidane muttered, his hands clasped in anticipation.

CREEEAAKKK

Everyone in the mead hall turned their heads towards the front door, utterly ruining the moment: *Lord Gizamaluke had finally arrived.*

"Um... *hi?*" the demi-god saluted the crowd, awkwardly waving his hand.

"*Oh, you've gotta be shitting me!*" Zidane's outrage echoed across the room.

Thirty minutes later

Instead of the grand palace of stone and gold that Freya had imagined, Reis's actual dwelling was just a humble, yet gorgeous chalet overlooking the vast Myrkvidr forest.

"Here we are... dreamy, isn't it?" Gizamaluke said as they walked through a small front garden teeming with flowers. Cleyra's leaves provided shelter from the sun, and its branches were chock-full of ripe, appetizing fruits.

"It's beautiful," the knight muttered in awe, wishing she had half of the goddess' gardening skills.

"Alright, this is as far as I go," the demi-god said as he rapped on the house's door. "My mother will answer any question you may have to the best of her abilities. She's really, *really* old, so please be patient with her."

"... You won't be staying?" the dragoon asked, a little surprised.

"No. I've already told you everything I had to," he answered in his unfailingly polite tone. "Listen to her and draw your own conclusions. Come see me when you've made up your mind, okay?"

“... Okay. Thank you,” she said as she watched him leave.

The chalet’s door creaked open behind her, and the knight felt an unfathomably mighty, yet soothing presence.

“I’ve been waiting for you, my child...” a cheerful, yet positively *ancient* voice greeted her. “I’m glad you made it...”

Freya gulped and turned around; a petite Cleyran granny was beaming at her. Her fur was white as snow, and she wore a green ankle-length tunic belted at the waist.

“Mother Reis... forgive my rudeness,” the dragoon apologized, immediately dropping to her knees.

“Oh, save the formalities for someone who cares, dear,” Reis chuckled, helping Freya to her feet. “Come, I’ll make you a big cup of lemon tea. I’ve heard you like it with honey!”

“Uh... sure...” the dragoon stammered.

39. Götterdämmerung

“Please, sit wherever you like... except the pink couch, that’s my spot,” Reis said, disappearing through a curtained door. “I’ll be right back!”

“Uh... okay...” Freya mumbled; the wooden furniture, the potted plants, the books, the fluffy woolen rug, the crystal cabinet full of perfectly arranged tableware... the goddess’ living room was the epitome of grandmotherly interior design, and the dragoon digged her style so much that she was beginning to doubt her own mental age.

“*Haha!* You should see your face right now!” the elderly lady commented, returning from the kitchen with a teapot and two delicate porcelain cups with lemon juice and honey on a silver tray.

“I think I’m in love with your house, ma’am,” the knight impulsively said before remembering just *who* she was talking to.

“Aww, thanks, dear!” the granny cooed, pouring her some tea. “And please, just call me Reis. I may be a few millennia old, but *ma’am* is a bit excessive, don’t you think?”

“Yes, ma’am... I mean, *Reis*... sorry...” Freya nervously stammered, mentally kicking herself as she smelled the delicious infusion. “Oh my, this is fantastic..! Thank you..!”

“Isn’t it too sweet? ’Cause people think I’m a little too fond of honey, but you know what? *Screw them*... screw them and their lame opinions,” the goddess declared, raising her cup as she sank into her favorite couch.

“Hear, hear,” the knight concurred with a bemused smile; the Allmother was certainly *not* what she had expected, but she wasn’t disappointed either.

“So, I take it your father and my son have caught you up on what’s going on here,” Reis said, angling an inquisitive stare at her guest.

“Mostly yes, but I still have so many questions...” Freya answered.

“Go ahead.”

“Alright... what happened between you and Berlioz? Why is this realm a secret?” the knight asked.

“Oof... those are tough questions...” the goddess sighed, making a pause to drink some tea. “What exactly do you know about him?”

“Well... he was the original Dragonslayer, leader of the First Rebellion, founder of Burmecia, and creator of the Dragon’s Crest...” Freya recalled. “He used to be a simple farmer, but the souls he took from his slain foes allowed him to break free from the Crystal and build Fólkvangr... that’s how our civilization was born...”

Reis interrupted her with a wry chuckle.

“That’s the official version, my dear...” she said. “Reality is a bit more complex than that.”

“What do you mean..?”

“He was never a mortal to begin with...” the Allmother stated, much to Freya’s surprise. ‘Long before the birth of the three nations, dragonkind ruled unopposed what eventually became Burmecia,’ she explained. “When your ancestors first came to the basin, fleeing from a great plague that had ravaged their homeland, the *Drekar*, as dragons call themselves, enslaved them to be used as servants and fodder.”

“That story always gave me nightmares as a child...” the knight commented.

“Of course it did... I still dream of the killings from time to time...” the goddess grimly answered. “You know... Burmecian flesh and souls are still highly coveted delicacies among my kind.”

“... *Y-Your kind..?*” Freya stammered, suddenly terrified.

“Yes. I’m a *Dreki*, my dear... one of the oldest alive...” Reis answered in an almost apologetic tone. “... So is Berlioz.”

The knight felt an urge to sit down despite being already seated.

“What..?” she whispered. “So we’ve been hunting your kin all this time..? *Why..?*”

The Allmother sighed.

“Berlioz wasn’t just any *Dreki*... he was the son and only heir of Clan Völsung’s alpha, *Wothn*,” she explained. “Clan Völsung was believed to have descended from the Old Gods themselves, and they had the raw power to back their claim, so they were considered semi-divine among my people. My father and *Wothn* had arranged for me to marry Berlioz in

order to unite our tribes and become the undisputed lords of the Drekar...”

“... Did you love him at least..?” the dragoon asked, and Reis chuckled.

“Oh, not at all. At first I couldn’t stand him... he was standoffish, moody, and hilariously weak,” she answered with a nostalgic smile. “But then I realized that deep beneath his obnoxious exterior, lied a decent man with a strong sense of justice.”

“Why did he turn on his own people..?”

The goddess stared at her empty cup for a moment before answering.

“Berlioz never felt at ease around other Drekar... they would often shun and abuse him because of his reluctance to feed on sentient beings,” she recalled as she rolled up her sleeves, revealing a pair of almost *skeletal* forearms. “Problem is, we are natural soul devourers. Without a steady supply of spiritual energy, our flesh decays, our bones crumble into dust, and our minds shatter like glass.”

Freya covered her mouth, horrified by Reis’s condition.

“Does that hurt..?” she asked, almost in a whisper.

“I’m over two thousand years old, sweetie... I’ve had plenty of time to get used to it,” the goddess replied with a wry smile. “I appreciate your concern, though.”

“Why did he starve himself like that..?”

“... I assume you remember the legend of King Athelric, founder of the now extinct royal bloodline...” Reis answered.

“Sure... every Burmecian knows it...” the knight concurred. “He was the first and last mortal to earn the title of Spear of Berlioz via honorable duel. No other candidate has challenged the Allfather and won since then...”

The Allmother snorted.

“Actually, Berlioz totally threw that fight, even if Athelric was the sole mortal to ever wound him,” she said.

“... Why did he spare him?”

“Because he loved him, of course,” the goddess stated. “Everything in Burmecian history, from the

First Rebellion to our current predicament, can be traced back to the day those two first met.”

“How did it happen..?”

Reis smiled fondly, as if she had just remembered a cute anecdote.

“When Berlioz was just a little fledgling, he left his father’s side in a moment of distraction and got lost in the forest below his home mountain,” she recalled. “He wandered alone for hours on end until a pack of hungry *axe beaks* ambushed him near a hidden Burmecian village.”

“Ugh... I hate those things...”

“I know, right? The thing is, fledglings are tough, but not strong enough to survive a ten-to-one fight, so they badly injured him...” the Allmother said. “Luckily, Athelric was hunting nearby. He may have been a young boy, but what he lacked in age, he compensated in skill. When he saw the scene, he climbed a tall tree and shot the beasts dead one by one with his trusty longbow.”

“How noble...” Freya commented.

“Berlioz was too wounded to survive on his own, so Athelric secretly took him home and nursed him

back to health,” Reis answered. “The two of them became fast friends; Berlioz even learned a few Burmecian words. Everything was coming along swimmingly... until Wothn and his warband found the hidden village.”

“Oh, no...”

“Yeah... Athelric and Berlioz tried to explain the situation to him, but Wothn burned the settlement to the ground and rounded up the survivors for slaughter,” the goddess sighed. “For the next few weeks, little Berlioz was force-fed the souls of the villagers by his own father, both for health reasons, and to ensure he wouldn’t forget how the food chain worked. The experience utterly *changed him*... turned him into a bitter shell of his former self.”

“... That’s why he began starving himself...” the knight muttered.

“I didn’t understand him at first... having grown in a powerful clan, I was used to eating whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, no questions asked,” Reis regretfully admitted. “I know it’s probably not the best idea to tell you that, but you need to know the truth.”

Freya lowered her gaze and sank in her seat.

“I can’t judge you either...” she answered, eyeing the spot where her Dragon’s Crest used to be. “I’ve also killed for selfish reasons when I was young and stupid...”

“It’s funny... we were born in diametrically opposed times, yet things haven’t changed all that much...” the Allmother commented, taking a sip of her tea before resuming her story. “As Berlioz grew, so did his ideals. He began searching for alternative energy sources, experimenting, naively believing that if he found an acceptable substitute for sentient souls, the Drekar would cease their oppression of the Burmecian people. Naturally, this only exacerbated their contempt for him, and things came to a head when his father captured Athelric, who had somehow survived the destruction of his hometown.”

“What an...”

“Indeed,” the goddess interrupted her. “Wothn tried to force his son to publicly execute his childhood friend and savior in order to purge the shame he had supposedly brought upon the clan...”

“I’m guessing that didn’t go well...”

“Ah, *hahahah*, you have no idea!” Reis chuckled. “He may have been severely underfed, but he was still a furious Völsung, *and you don’t fuck with a furious Völsung...*”

“You were there, too?”

“More than that! I helped him escape with his friend,” the Allmother answered. “Of course I had to leave with them... setting your father-in-law’s dwelling *ablaze* isn’t exactly well regarded in Drekar society.”

“*Gods...* and where did you go..?”

“We found a cave in the Aerbs Mountains, near the current location of North Gate. Our clans were hot on our heels, so we couldn’t risk leading them to yet another Burmecian settlement,” Reis explained. “We were hungry, cold, and scared out of our minds, but we survived.”

“That must have been horrible... I’m sorry,” the dragoon commented.

“Yes... yes it was. I felt miserable, and seriously considered turning myself in at least twice, but deep down I knew we were long past the point of no return. When things settled down a bit, Athelric led us to a hidden rebel village, which would eventually

become the capital of the future Burmecian kingdom. Using illusion magic, we assumed the guise of a refugee couple in order to fit in,” she answered. “We lived with Athelric for a few years. He was real nice to us... taught us the ways of his people. Eventually we built our own house and became farmers! How crazy is that? It was around that time when I got pregnant with Li'l Giz. We were... *happy*.”

Freya smirked at the idea of referring to an absurdly powerful, two-thousand years old entity as *Li'l Giz*... guess she wasn't the only one with embarrassing parents.

“Um... may I ask you a question?”

“You just did,” the goddess playfully retorted. “Shoot.”

“Why was your connection to Gizamaluke erased from history..?”

Reis averted her eyes for a moment.

“Let's just say his father and I didn't part ways on the better of terms...” she answered. “It all started two years after Giz was born. A lone Dreki scout discovered the settlement and attacked it, looking for an easy meal. He was young and foolish... a *child*,

and Berlioz wasn't around, so I beat him into submission. Then I realized that in order to protect the village, he had to die."

"Did you kill him..?"

"No... but I really should have," Reis answered in a quivering voice. "He was so scared and helpless... I just couldn't bring myself to deliver the final blow... and that was all he needed to sucker-punch me and escape."

The goddess tucked her hair behind her left ear and cocked her head backwards, revealing a brutal scar running from her jaw to her collarbone.

"Yikes..." Freya winced.

"Little bastard got me good... it wasn't as bad as it looks, but it bled like crazy. Berlioz arrived shortly after, and when he saw me like that, he begged Athelric to take me to the local healer while he went off to hunt the fleeing raider."

"Did he catch him?"

"*Did he catch him?* Oh, sweet child, you have no idea..." Reis chuckled. "Berlioz was as furious as he was *hungry*, so when he finally got his claws around the scout's neck, he took his time tearing his soul to

shreds before feasting on it... the absolute worst crime in Drekar society.”

“Ugh... so he’s essentially a cannibal...”

“I’d like to deny it, but I really can’t,” the goddess shrugged. “That night, the grieving townspeople buried their dead in the forest, too scared of retaliation to build a funerary pyre, and Berlioz swore he would force dragonkind to either change their ways or leave the land.”

“I still have trouble believing he defeated the Drekar on his own...”

“Of course he didn’t fight alone... the town shaman had been researching draconic magic for years, hoping to replicate it, but his counterfeit sorcery was... *ineffectual*, to put it gently,” Reis explained. “Berlioz changed that. He gave your kin the power of soul manipulation, the Dragon’s Crest, and instructed the village’s best warriors in its use.”

“So that’s how the dragon knights were born...” Freya muttered, feeling guilty without knowing why. “Did you fight in the war too?”

“No... I simply couldn’t handle seeing him and his followers killing, enslaving and feeding on my brothers and sisters, no matter how much they had it

coming,” Reis somberly answered. “Maybe it was necessary... maybe it was not... I’ll never know for certain.”

“And what did you do?”

“One night, I told him I couldn’t stand his methods anymore. I begged him to *at least* stop the soul stealing, but he had become hopelessly addicted to the power boost it gave him,” the Allmother said. “He promised me he would stop once the war was over, and I believed him at first... but then he established his dragon-hunting cult, and I started fearing for the life of our child.”

“What did you do?”

“I left the kingdom and took Li’l Giz with me...” the goddess sighed. “He was just a kid, unable to conceal his true nature, and I didn’t want him to grow in such a dangerous environment...”

“Well, that explains a lot,” Freya sighed, lowering her eyes. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that...”

“Don’t worry, dear... it’s water under the bridge now,” Reis answered, offering the dragoon a grateful smile.

“I’ve noticed Berlioz is quite dismissive of his son... why is that?” the knight ventured, aware of touching a delicate subject.

“Ugh... where to begin... both of them are hopeless idealists, but whereas Berlioz is a slave of his lowest instincts and deluded himself into thinking everything he did was for the greater good, Giz has a stronger will and a sharper mind; he never gave into his appetites, not even once...” the Allmother explained. “For Berlioz, his adamant refusal to feed on souls, coupled with his success at staying reasonably healthy without renouncing his principles, are constant reminders of his own weakness...”

“But why doesn’t he try to learn from his son instead of shunning him?!” Freya exclaimed.

“Because he’s essentially built his whole utopia on quicksand,” Reis stated. “He’s running out of energy, and being the prideful old fool he is, he refuses to admit that merely patching his short-sighted solution is no longer viable.

“What happens once his reserves are exhausted..?”

“Simple; Fólkvangr collapses and all the souls in it are absorbed by the Crystal, including him,” the Allmother explained. “That’s not necessarily a bad outcome, though... both of our realms are completely unnatural, and maybe it’s a good idea to let the cycle of life take its course unimpeded.”

“Wait, how’s it possible that Myrkvidr can sustain itself without consuming souls, but Berlioz’s domain self-destructs the moment he runs out of fuel?” the dragoon exclaimed.

“You’re quite observant, aren’t you, dear?” Reis smirked. “The answer lies in three factors: antiquity, design and power source. In a nutshell, Myrkvidr is not only far newer than Fólkvangr, but more energy-efficient too.”

“What about the power source?”

“Ah, that’s our secret ingredient!” the granny playfully declared. “It’s a mixture between my own spiritual power and Gizamaluke’s, our people’s faith, and residual Crystal energy.”

“*Crystal energy?! You don’t mean the one that keeps the world going, don’t you..?*” Freya, squeaked.

“Relax, dearie, we’re not stupid enough to tamper with the source of all life!” the Allmother chuckled. “During his time in the soul stream, Giz had the unique opportunity to study the Crystal up-close and, much to our surprise, he discovered that it constantly radiates a small amount of spiritual energy to the environment. This radiation can be harnessed to fuel Myrkvidr for centuries... but it’s not enough to sustain the two realms at once.”

“Then what do you suggest..?”

Without saying a word, the goddess set her teacup on the coffee table, got off her couch, left the room through the curtained door, and came back holding a bizarre, organic-looking polearm.

“W-What is this..?” Freya asked.

“This is King Athelric’s spear, the *Dragon’s Hair*,” the goddess answered, offering it to her. “It holds the essence of *Wothn himself*, and is the only blade in existence capable of punching through Berlioz’s spirit armor. Be wary, though; this is one seriously arrogant weapon, and won’t obey you until you show it who’s boss.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on!” the knight exclaimed, horrified by the implications of the gift.

“What do you expect me to do with this?!”

“I want *you* to unite us, Cleyrans, Burmecians and Drekar, and lead us into a new era,” Reis answered with thinly veiled enthusiasm. “I want you to succeed where we failed, and for that to happen, you must first convince Berlioz to get his act together and work with us for the sake of our people.”

“Um... with all due respect... if he hasn’t listened to his own wife and child for two thousand years, what makes you think he’ll listen to me?” Freya asked, accepting the spear more out of courtesy than anything.

“He *will* listen because you two share a common language that Giz and I cannot speak...”

“And that would be..?”

“*Power*, of course,” the Allmother smirked. “Don’t worry, we’ll be the strength behind your swings, but we require a skilled hand and an sharp mind to guide our blade.”

The dragoon didn’t answer. Instead, she quietly admired the weapon in her hands; its unfathomable historical relevance still boggled her mind. “*This is really happening...*” she thought as her fingers

explored its surface; it was definitely inhabited by a slumbering god, and if she closed her eyes, she could almost feel him *breathe*.

“Isn’t it ironic..? Long ago, people used to call this spear the *Divider of Heaven*... but in your hands, perhaps it can unite it for good,” Reis said, offering Freya a warm smile.

“... Can we still save the people in Fólkvangr?” the knight finally asked.

“If we convince him to meld the two realms, probably,” the goddess answered.

Freya averted her eyes and pondered her options. After a while, she rose to her feet and calmly headed for the front door.

“W-Where are you going..?” Reis asked, following her outside.

“Do you think she’s alright?” Zidane asked, watching the Allmother’s chalet from the safety of a high tree branch. “They’ve been in there for a while now...”

“Relax, pal, she’ll be fine... *I hope...*” Puck failed to reassure him.

“*Quiet! Someone’s coming!*” Wulfweard hissed.

The three spirits dove for cover and Zidane held his breath as Reis’s door opened and Freya emerged from the house, *Dragon’s Hair* in hand.

“I-Isn’t that thing..?” Fridgeir stammered, pointing at the weapon.

“... *horribly cursed?*” Puck completed his sentence.

“*What..?!*” the Genome hissed a little too loud, immediately covering his mouth. “... *Just how many doomsday artifacts do you guys have..?*”

“*Would you please shut up?!?*” the old Partisan chided them, clenching his fists.

Without saying a word, Freya walked to the center of the garden. With her eyes closed, she took a deep breath and brandished the spear once; the gentle afternoon breeze turned into a gale, shooting Cleyra’s fallen leaves skywards and nearly knocking Zidane off his perch.

FWOOOM!

“Whoa... *that’s one powerful stick...*” the Genome thought, strengthening his grip on the branch just in case.

As the knight began performing what could only be described as a *martial dance*, a swarm of floating petals surrounded her, trailing her blade like ethereal paint strokes; her movements flowed so gracefully, so seamlessly into each other, that it looked like she had become one with the wind.

“So cool...” Puck whispered, utterly enthralled by the spectacle unfolding before him.

“Indeed...” Wulfweard concurred, his chest swollen with pride.

The *Dragon’s Hair* was by far the strangest weapon Freya had ever wielded, but its most disconcerting aspect was that she could clearly feel the emotions of the spirit sealed inside, and it was utterly *distraught*.

“You miss the outside world, don’t you..?” she muttered, sensing the dragon’s sorrow. “*It must get horribly lonely in there...*”

Refusing to be pitied by a mortal, Wothn immediately lashed out at her, sending a wave of

primal magic through her veins that nearly tore her apart from the inside.

“Ack..!” she grunted, fighting back his influence as the leaves whirling around her caught fire and burned with pale, ghostly flames.

“Shit, not this again!” Zidane spat, leaping off the tree and rushing to her aid, but the Allmother intercepted him so fast that it looked like she had *teleported* in front of him.

“Don’t worry, young one. She’s got this,” she said in a kind, grandmotherly tone that brutally clashed with her inhuman abilities. “Remember what I told you, dear! Show that old fool who’s boss!”

The Genome glanced back and forth between the goddess and his lifelong friend before nodding in reluctant agreement.

“O-Okay...” he stammered.

“C’mon, *Freya! You can do this!*” Puck yelled at the top of his lungs, and both Fridgeir and Zidane immediately followed suit.

Freya’s whole body trembled under the immense pressure of Wothn’s power, but instead of panicking,

she closed her eyes, slowed down her breathing, and cleared her mind. A faint, glowing aura began to form around the knight as she meditated, pulsating to the rhythm of her breathing. Zidane squinted, a little confused.

“Is that some sort of *Trance*..?” he muttered, eliciting a chuckle from the goddess.

“There are smarter ways to use your power than just letting it consume you, boy,” she commented. “I believed *he* had already taught you as much.”

The Genome frowned at the mention of Kuja, and the Allmother smirked in return.

“You’re a compassionate lad, and a righteous king... if a little paranoid at times,” she stated, eyes still fixed on the dragoon. “Don’t worry about your brother. I shall release him in short order.”

“Y-You will..?”

“He hasn’t paid for what he’s done yet... he’s not even close... but I’ve been watching you. I find your ability to forgive *inspiring*,” she answered. “I’ll let him know he owes you a big one.”

“Hah... that will surely piss him off...”

“I’m counting on it.”

The Genome smiled back at the goddess. “Thanks...” he said, sheepishly bowing his head.

“Don’t mention it,” she said, and then she cocked her eyebrows. “Oh, look! Told you she could do it!”

Zidane turned his head towards his friend so fast that he almost snapped his own neck; Freya was grinning at them, triumphantly holding the (now tamed) cursed spear up in the air.

Later, in Myrkvidr Forest

Cleyra’s illusory moon shone brightly amidst an ocean of stars when Fridgeir began singing the last tune of the night. It was a sweet foreign song about finding hope in unexpected places that no one had heard before, not even his daughter, who had grown listening to his endless repertoire. Zidane and Puck delightedly bobbed their heads to the music while Wulfweard fed a few sticks to their dying bonfire. Freya was captivated by the lyrics, even if she didn’t fully understand them.

“What language was that, Fridgey?” Puck asked once the song was over. “Lemme guess... Daguerrean?”

“Bingo!” the bard piped up. “I learned it from a traveler during a gig. Amazing guy, you would have loved him. We got pinned down *for hours* in a pub during a blizzard; I didn’t understand a word of what he was saying, but there was a piano, and I had my mandolin, so we managed to communicate just fine. Maybe we should have set up a tip jar, *haha!*”

“I’ve visited a grand total of *four different worlds*, yet I still feel your stories are better than mine,” the dragon knight half-jokingly commented.

“Hey, we did fun stuff too!” Zidane chimed in. “Remember when we went treasure hunting with Choco the Chocobo?”

“... You’re not helping, monkey butt.”

“*Aaanyway*, you know my secret, honey,” Fridgeir intervened. “It’s not the anecdote that counts...”

“... It’s the way you tell it. I know,” Freya sighed, averting her eyes.

Puck cocked an eyebrow at her reaction. “Um... you okay, girl? ’Cause you’re making *the face*,” he asked.

“What do you mean? I’m not making a face!” she retorted a little too brusquely.

“Aw, c’mon, you always have that look when you’re about to deliver bad news,” he countered. “What’s wrong?”

The knight pursed her lips.

“I’m leaving with Gizamaluke... tomorrow,” she said, piercing the ghost king with her jade gaze. “We’ll try to knock some sense into Berlioz.”

A dense silence grew between the five companions... until Sir Wulfweard broke the ice by snorting.

“Why so surprised? She made her choice painfully obvious when she performed the *Dance of the Twin Dragons* in front of Reis,” he said, throwing the last stick into the fire before angling a knowing smile at his former student. “I still remember how you struggled with that form... night after night you trained under the rain to no avail. You just weren’t cut out for it, but that wouldn’t deter you, no. *Nothing would.*”

“*Heh...* it was mom’s favorite *kata*. Whenever I felt like giving up on my training, I started practicing it instead. It gave me strength,” Freya admitted in a fond tone, and then she sighed. “... I wonder if I’m doing the right thing.”

“What does your gut tell you?” Zidane asked.

Freya jokingly pretended to listen to her own stomach.

“... It’s starting to believe this could actually work,” she answered.

“Then it must be right. Your tummy’s always been quite perceptive,” Puck declared, rubbing her back encouragingly. A little surprised by his touch, but by no means averse to it, she craned an amused glance at him, cocked an eyebrow, and then returned to watching the flames.

“Thanks guys... for everything,” she said, smiling affectionately at the group. “The last few months have been terrible... but it’s been an honor to fight alongside you.”

Without saying a word, Sir Wulfweard stood up, smiled proudly at his former student and performed the Burmecian salute. Nearly moved to tears, Freya rose to her feet and returned the gesture.

“Well... it’s getting late, so I’ll be going now,” the old knight said, nodding politely at the rest of the group.

“Yeah, me too,” Fridgeir concurred. “You coming, guys?”

“I’ll stay a little longer, thanks,” Freya answered.

Zidane glanced at her, then at Puck, and yawned loudly to dissimulate his mischievous smirk.

“I’ll be on my way too... wouldn’t wanna be alone with these two in the middle of the woods,” he said, cheekily waving at them as he left. “*Ta-ta*, lovebirds.”

“Hey, what the..?! Dude, not funny!” Puck squawked, angrily brandishing his fist at the Genome. “*Fucking douchebag...*” he grumbled as he began putting on his coat, but the knight grabbed him by the wrist, stopping him dead in his tracks.

“Hold on a second, Your Majesty...” she said, angling an inscrutable stare at him.

“Freya... I...” he stammered as she pulled him gently back to his seat. “What... are you doing?”

The knight sighed.

“... Look, I’ve been thinking about what happened earlier on... well, almost happened,” the knight explained, letting go of him. “Sorry if that made you feel uncomfortable... guess I got a bit carried away.”

Puck chuckled in disbelief.

“W-Why would you apologize for that?” he asked, blushing furiously under his fur. “I’ve been wanting you to hold me like that for years.”

It was Freya’s turn to chuckle.

“So... my hunch was right all along...” she said, averting her eyes. “... I didn’t want to believe it. It was easier that way.”

“Easier..? What do you mean?”

“Keeping my priorities straight,” she answered. “For most of my life, I’ve only had two certainties: that Fratley was my soulmate, and that what you and I were doing was *right*. Come to think of it, it was an awfully simplistic mindset, but thinking outside of the box terrified me.”

“Why..?”

The knight lowered her eyes and twiddled her thumbs.

“I was afraid that if I stopped pushing forward and started asking myself questions, I would realize that our world... our *home*... was broken beyond repair, and that we had wasted our lives fighting for a doomed cause.”

Puck hesitatingly extended his arm and held Freya’s hand. She sniffed once and smiled through tears as she reciprocated the gesture.

“I was such a coward... wasn’t I..?” she asked.

“It’s never cowardly to fight for your ideals, especially when you think you have no chance to win,” he answered. “It’s just sad that you forgot about yourself along the way and bottled all that pain up. I wish I could have done more to help you.”

She angled a loving stare at him, and he lost himself again in her warm jade eyes.

“Help me? You gave me purpose when I needed it most. I owe you my life,” she said, gently squeezing his hands. “... It’s me who should apologize for not doing enough...”

Puck clicked his tongue, knowing that the subject was bound to crop up eventually.

“It’s not your fault. I made too many mistakes, pissed off too much people, and that delusional bastard got me good,” he said. “I know the mind probably doesn’t work that way... but, please, promise me you’ll try to stop blaming yourself for things that are out of your control. I mean, how am I supposed to rest in peace knowing that you’re suffering because of me?”

The knight snorted with laughter, and a single tear hit Puck’s index finger.

“... For the record, you didn’t make me uncomfortable back in the mead hall,” he blurted out before he could regret it. “I was desperately trying to stop myself from telling you how much I love you right there and then.”

He didn’t even have time to think before Freya pulled him into a passionate embrace.

Author’s note:

The tune Fridgeir was singing is called “**L’esperance en l’homme**”; it’s a beautiful French song written by **Claude Nougaro**, and if you can spare a few minutes I strongly recommend listening

to **Marc Berthoumieux's** version. You can find it on Youtube for free, so go check it out!

This chapter was revised by Erica, so I want to thank her for her invaluable help. I also want to thank all the new readers, followers and reviewers who have joined us on this surrealistic journey: you're the best, guys!

Next chapter: Freya vs Berlioz!

40. Downpour (Part One)

Ginnungagap, the void between worlds

If there was one thing Freya used to treasure in her youth was *silence*. It was for her a big part of the charm of being a wanderer. She was particularly fond of the almost mystical peace of mind that venturing into the unknown gave her.

It wasn't the case anymore.

The eerie stillness of the primordial abyss was making her antsy. As if marching headlong into an ambush wasn't a sufficiently tense situation already.

"We'll reach Fólkvangr in a few hours. I know it ain't easy, but try to get some rest, okay?" Gizamaluke broke the ice, expertly maneuvering their ship through a crystalline asteroid field.

Freya didn't answer; she was too busy staring blankly out the porthole.

“Can I ask you something? And I want you to be completely honest with me,” she finally said.

“... You want to know your odds of winning, don’t you?” Gizamaluke predicted her question. “After all, far more experienced warriors have walked the same path before, but no one has ever succeeded.”

“Heh... you’re not exactly the god of subtlety, aren’t you?” she retorted.

The spirit chuckled. “... They were doomed to fail from the start.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because the whole judgement thing is a trap, meant to identify and neutralize those who would rise against Athelric’s bloodline,” he explained. “No one survives Berlioz’s wrath by chance, especially in his realm.”

“Well... he’s already failed to kill me once,” the knight remarked.

“Believe me, he was being *merciful* back then,” the Dreki stated. “You can’t imagine the things he’s capable of when he really wants to hurt you...”

“Wow, thanks... I’m *touched* by his generosity,” Freya scoffed.

“Look, I’m not trying to defend him, okay? I’m just pointing out that you’ve walked away *mostly* unscathed after questioning his rules, punching him in the face, and *siding with his ex*,” Gizamaluke enumerated. “He respects you... in his own twisted way.”

“Or maybe he’s onto you, and he threw my soul where you could find it to see if you would rescue me,” the dragoon suggested.

“Maybe... but we’re all running out of time, and his lack of reaction can only mean two things: either he has no idea what’s going on, or he knows about Cleyra and does not care...” the Dreki answered. “I really hope it’s the latter...”

“What if I fail..?” Freya asked.

“... You won’t,” Gizamaluke answered, one second too late for the dragoon to buy it.

“Thanks... I appreciate it...” she sighed.

Cleyra, Myrkvidr

“Dude... could you please stop that? I can’t hear myself think,” Puck groaned, sitting on Reis’s doorstep.

Zidane halted his anxious pacing to give the Burmecian a death glare.

“*How can you be so calm..?!*” he barked, pointing at the sky. “She’s somewhere out there, dueling a freaking *god of war* to the death, and we can’t do shit to help!”

“Calm..? Do I look *fucking* calm to you..?” the ghost king retorted, clenching his fists.

“When will you understand, monkey? She was chosen by the goddess! That means she doesn’t need you to win, so tell your damn ego to shut the hell up!” Sir Wulfweard exploded, eliciting an outraged gasp from the Genome.

“Guys, seriously, *stop*,” Fridgeir intervened, unwilling to put up with any more tension. “We’ve all done everything in our power to support her. Fighting among ourselves right now is as unfair as it is pointless.”

Click!

Creeeeeak!

“You’re only half right, Fridgey...” Reis chimed in, emerging from her house. Despite her attempts to appear serene and confident, it was clear she was just as nervous as everyone else.

“W-What do you mean..?” the bard asked.

“Come on in, gentlemen; there’s still something you can do to lend your friend a hand,” she answered.

The first thing the four men noticed as they entered Reis’s chalet was the large levitating mirror in the center of her living room. Its oval frame was made of pure mythril, exquisitely engraved with long-forgotten runes.

“Whoa... spooky...” Zidane murmured, staring at the strange floating artifact. It reminded him of his brother’s taste in decoration.

“Oh, my... is that the actual, legendary *Hlidskjálfr*..?” Puck exclaimed in awe.

“The *Hlid*... what?” the Genome squawked. “Dude... y’all need to fire the guy who names your magic stuff...”

“Hahaha, yeah. It was Wothn’s wedding gift. Pretty cool, huh?” the Allmother chuckled as she activated the mirror by touching the engravings in a certain order. Once she finished inputting the activation sequence, the artifact began displaying Freya and Gizamaluke’s starship like a mystical monitor.

“It’s just like Wulf’s beer trick!” Zidane exclaimed, earning himself a confused stare from the goddess.

“His what?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Uh... nevermind...”

The Dreki shrugged and switched to a view of the vessel’s command bridge with a wave of her hand.

“Freya..! She’s still safe...” Fridgeir sighed, somewhat relieved.

“How long till they reach Fólkvangr, ma’am?” Wulfweard asked.

“Half an hour at most...” the goddess answered.

“You said we could still help her...” Puck stated. “What can we do, ma’am?”

Reis made an ominous pause before turning to face them.

“Berlioz is a harvester of souls. His might comes from the countless spirits he has absorbed,” she explained. “To counter such a monstrous power, Freya will need as much spiritual energy as she can get. That’s why my son and I will link our souls to hers.”

“With all due respect, ma’am... will that be enough to challenge him..?” the colonel inquired, his voice subtly tinged with worry.

“She will still be at a disadvantage in terms of raw strength, but Berlioz has grown complacent... arrogant... *old*...” the Dreki answered. “His overreliance on soul magic has blinded him to his own physical decline, and now that someone has the means to actually hurt him...”

“He’s in for a nasty surprise!” Puck confidently declared. “You can lend her our energy too, right? That’s why you called us here.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple...” Reis somberly answered, producing an obsidian knife. She made a

deep cut in her palm, and warm draconic blood started dripping on the carpet. “To weave our life force together, we must literally become *one*. If Berlioz severs the link while we are still bound to her...”

“We’ll be annihilated...” Wulfweard completed her sentence.

Fridgeir stepped forward without hesitation and extended his hand.

“You know what? Bring it,” Puck said as he followed the bard’s example. Sir Wulfweard smirked and offered his soul to the goddess too.

Zidane suddenly found himself paralyzed. Twenty years ago, he would have volunteered for the ultimate sacrifice without missing a beat, but the idea of his son growing up without a father and leaving Garnet to fend for herself on the verge of a new world war stabbed itself into his heart like one of Ifa’s thorns.

“Buddy... I appreciate everything you’ve done for us, but this isn’t your fight anymore,” Puck told him. “Go back to Alexandria... your people needs you.”

The Genome let out a wry chuckle.

“... Two of my best friends are in mortal danger, and you think this isn’t personal?” he answered, removing one of his gloves.

The Burmecians smiled at him as the Allmother took him up on his offer, and then the five of them smeared their blood on the mirror’s frame. The runes avidly drank the tribute, and once their morbid thirst was quenched, they began glowing a vibrant green color.

“The pact is sealed,” Reis stated, crushing the obsidian blade in her fist with a sickening crunch.

“What do we do now..?” Fridgeir asked.

“We wait and hope for the best...” she answered.

Ginnungagap, the void between worlds

“Umm... Gizamaluke? Is this normal?” Freya asked, pointing at the glowing rune that had appeared where her old Dragon’s Crest used to be.

The Dreki left the ship on autopilot and rushed to her side. His eyes widened when he recognized Reis's seal on the knight's shoulder.

"Oh... this is what my mother promised you... the power to duel Berlioz on an almost equal footing," he sighed.

"Why do you sound so disheartened, then?" she inquired, surprised by his reaction. "... Are you afraid I might hurt your father with this..?"

Gizamaluke averted his gaze for a moment.

"Freya... this is a *convergence seal*... as long as you have it, my mother's very *existence* will be bound to yours," he explained.

The dragoon gasped.

"Wait... does that mean..?" she mumbled, overwhelmed by the implications.

"... Yes..." he confirmed, pulling out an obsidian knife from a leather pouch and cutting himself with a swift motion.

"Whoa, what are you doing?!" the knight exclaimed, recoiling like a snake.

“Relax... I won’t hurt you...” Gizamaluke said as he extended his wounded hand towards her. “You need my blood to complete the ritual. Here, let me add it to your seal.”

“... *Why..?*” Freya stammered in utter disbelief. “This is *way* too much... why entrust me with your lives..? We’ve only just met!”

The Dreki chuckled.

“Well, who’s exaggerating now? We’ve been watching over you since you were born...” he retorted as he painted a few symbols around the mystical brand. “Sorry I couldn’t make that sound any less creepy. In my defense, it was kind of our job.”

It was Freya’s turn to laugh.

“Thanks... I won’t let any harm come to you, or the souls living in Cleyra,” she promised.

“There. You’re all set,” Gizamaluke said as he crushed the dark crystal into dust. The bloody pattern glowed green like the rest of the seal, and the knight felt an *ancient* power flood her soul, turning her into something... *else*. “How do you feel?”

“I feel ready...” she answered, clenching her fists.

“Good, because we have arrived,” he stated, pointing at the porthole. “Steel yourself for combat! Who knows what awaits beyond that gate!”

The proximity alarm flared to life as Fólkvangr’s crimson light engulfed the ship.

Fólkvangr

Rain.

Freya opened her eyes.

Rain.

She raised her gaze to the overcast heavens.

Rain.

She knew those clouds all too well, the drumming of raindrops on her helmet, the unmistakable scent of her home.

Burmecia.

“Gizamaluke!” she yelled, looking for the missing Dreki. “*Gizamaluke! Where are you?!*”

But only the distant thunder answered.

“*Dammit..*” she grunted, scanning her surroundings. She was standing at the base of a barren hill, and it wasn’t long before she recognized a familiar silhouette crowning its summit. “*The farmhouse...*” she thought, tightening her grip on the Dragon’s Hair; it was obviously a trap, yet she had no choice but to play along.

She began climbing. The downpour pounded mercilessly on her armor, but as a true daughter of the rain, she found it *invigorating*.

After a short walk, she reached the top. Her old house, the one she had built with Fratley decades ago, looked far more run-down than she remembered; the roof was full of holes, all windows had been boarded up, and the front door hung precariously from its last remaining hinge.

“Okay... no turning back now...” the knight muttered to herself, pushing it open with the tip of her spear.

Creeaaakkk

Darkness welcomed her as Freya stepped into the farmhouse's foyer. She had half-expected the door to slam itself shut behind her, but it remained mercifully open, providing the only light source in the building.

"*Gizamaluke! Can you hear me?*" the dragoon whispered, bracing for an ambush as she entered the living room. She winced as a furtive water droplet found its way into her right eye; there were so many leaks that it was practically raining inside.

"I hope you like the spot I picked for our final meeting..." a deep, familiar voice echoed in the dark, causing her heart to skip a beat. "Get comfy... you're going to spend a *long* time between these walls."

"*Berlioz!*" Freya gasped, unable to dissimulate her surprise. She spun on her heels, ready for trouble, but he was nowhere to be found. "Where are you? What have you done to Gizamaluke?!"

"He can't hear you where I sent him..." the Dreki taunted her. His voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. "Disgusting... your soul reeks

of him. I also smell thieves, losers and traitors... a *convergence seal*, perhaps..?”

“Thieves..? What are you talking about?!”

“Wait... that scent..! *It can't be..!*” the god exclaimed.

The fireplace roared to life without warning, revealing a towering armored figure standing in the corner.

“... I won't ask twice, varmint... *why do you smell like Reis?!*” Berlioz snarled, summoning his winged spear to his hand.

“Look... we come in peace... she sent us to talk to you,” the knight answered in the most soothing tone she could muster.

“If you're here to talk, then why did you bring that thing?” the Allfather retorted in a menacing tone. “I see... you stole the Dragon's Hair and Reis's lifeforce to usurp me...”

“What? No! Please, listen to me!” Freya exclaimed.

“I knew Gizamaluke was an ungrateful little mongrel... but to think he would kill his own mother...” the god muttered to himself, averting his

gaze. Even if his helmet obscured his features, his body language spoke loud and clear: a sacred line had been crossed, and he was going to make them pay for it.

“Berlioz, you’re misunderstanding everything!” the dragoon said, steeling herself for the inevitable.

“Oh, *am I..?*” he growled, glaring at her so intensely that she thought he had already stabbed her.

KLANG!

“So *fast..!*” Freya grunted, having barely managed to deflect the Dreki’s opening attack; he had darted towards her and attempted to impale her through the face, *all in a fraction of a second*. Hadn’t Reis’s seal enhanced her reflexes and strength, she would have been dead before even knowing a fight had started.

“*DIE!*” the Völsung roared, transitioning into a brutal spinning kick that sent her crashing into the next room.

KER-KRAKK!

Freya coughed and dragged herself backwards as the avatar of war calmly followed her through the

new, Burmecian-shaped hole in the wall.

“I must admit I fully expected your head to go *splat...*” he commented. “Good... it’s been way too long since the last time I got to hit someone *twice.*”

He raised his weapon, intent on gutting her like a fish, but she narrowly avoided death with a back roll. **CRACK!** the floorboards went as the spear pierced them like cardboard.

“Stop, Reis is alive!” the dragoon exclaimed, adopting a defensive stance. “I swear she sent us here to negotiate with you..!”

“***THIS CHARADE OF YOURS ENDS NOW!***” he roared, violently tearing his polearm out of the parquet.

“**ENOUGH!**” Reis’s disembodied voice echoed across the house, stopping the Allfather dead in his tracks as he prepared to lunge.

“Reis..? is that you?” he stammered, perplexed by her intervention. “I thought you were..!”

“I’ve made a soul pact with Freya and Gizamaluke. They’re under my protection now,” the goddess answered.

“But... *why*? Where are you? Why did you send these two in your stead?” he asked, glaring at the knight. “If you wish to kill me that much, then come and take my life yourself!”

“I don’t want to hurt you, and I’m bound to Myrkvidr for the same reason you’re bound to Folkvángur...”

Berlioz *flinched*.

“... Was it *you*..? The one who’s been fishing heathens and traitors out of the soul cycle..?!” he exclaimed, equal parts surprised and outraged. “No... the Reis I know isn’t strong enough for that... this has to be some kind of trick...”

“It’s not... she has created a haven for Burmecians and Cleyrans alike... I’ve seen it!” Freya intervened.

“QUIET, VARMINT! THE GODS ARE SPEAKING!” the Völsung roared, and the entire house shook and creaked under the power of his *voice*.

“NO! YOU SHUT UP!” the Allmother countered even louder, causing him to nearly lose his footing. **“I’ve grown stronger than you could possibly imagine without butchering countless**

innocents, and I'm done watching you repeat our ancestors' crimes!"

"Crimes? *Innocents*?! Do you seriously think that taking a few thieves and whores under your wing gives you the right to judge me?!" the Allfather barked, clenching his fists. "I freed the Burmecian people! I built their kingdom, *our kingdom*, with my own hands! I released them from the chains of mortality! And what did *you* do for them? You ran away and buried your head under the sand when we needed you most! *I* needed you, Reis!"

"You were out of control, and you still haven't realized that your cruelty has warped Burmecia into the very thing you rebelled against!" the goddess answered, her stern voice subtly tinged with sorrow.

Berlioz silently averted his gaze and tightened his grip on his weapon.

"I see... that's why you gave your servant my father's remains... one last insult before doing me in..." he said through gritted teeth. "Tell me something, Reis... you can feel everything she feels through the seal, right?"

“Killing me now won’t save Folkvángr... and both of us know what will happen once you’ve exhausted your spiritual reserves,” the goddess pressed on, much to Freya’s dismay.

“Uh... Reis..? I don’t think agitating him is a good idea...” the knight commented.

The Völsung slowly adopted a hunched-over stance, like a beast about to pounce on its prey. With a single hand, he ripped his helmet’s visor off to reveal a monstrous visage; he looked like a bloated, reptilian abomination wearing a badly damaged Burmecian pelt as a disguise.

“I was just planning on knocking some sense into you... but you had to spill the beans, didn’t you?” he said in a spine-chilling, downright *murderous* tone. “... Now that I think of it, I guess we both knew it would end this way...”

“You don’t understand, we can still save this realm, *together!*” the Allmother exclaimed. **“If only you could trust me for *five minutes*, we could put an end to the energy crisis once and for all!”**

“I appreciate the thought, but you can’t help me... no one can...” Berlioz answered as an intense purple glow seeped out through the openings in his

armor. “I’m sorry... I won’t enjoy this, but you leave me no choice.”

“Berlioz, wait..!”

The Allfather inhaled deeply and exhaled a wave of pitch-black fire, so devastating that everything caught in the blast was instantly vaporized.

“Nononono-!” Freya blurted out, making a dash for the nearest window.

CRASH!

“Yaaagh!” the knight screamed as she dove headfirst through the glass and into the mud. Dark flames erupted out of the building through every opening, so she remained prone until the onslaught was over.

The Völsung’s roar echoed across the whole dimension as Freya’s old home burned and crumbled.

“I need to start fighting back now..! But how..?!” the dragoon muttered as she rose to her feet. She had little time to think before a colossal shadow burst through the roof of the farmhouse and took to the skies, its monstrous silhouette outlined by a flickering tongue of lightning. *“W-What is that?!”*

she uttered, desperately trying not to lose the beast from sight, but the rabid downpour made the task nigh-impossible.

Suddenly, Berlioz folded his wings and plunged like a hawk. **“CRESCENT!”** he howled, jaws open and brimming with abyssal fire.

Freya dove and rolled out of the way, seconds before half of the hill was set ablaze.

FWOOOOOOM!

“Now would be a perfect time for a Trance...” she grunted, nervously looking for the Dreki; his ability to rapidly disappear into the storm despite his massive size was deeply unnerving.

“YOU’RE HERE TO CLAIM THE CROWN OF BURMECIA, AREN’T YOU, VARMIN?” the Allfather taunted her, suddenly emerging from the burning wreckage. His mouth was twisted into a savage grin, and his body was shrouded in his own flames, like darkness given form.

Freya readied the Dragon’s Hair and stood her ground.

“... THEN COME AND TAKE IT...” Berlioz growled.

41. Downpour (Part Two)

“Hey.”

“Hey...”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Not really...”

“Huh... me neither... c'mere...”

Freya smirked and wiggled closer to Puck. He hooked an arm around her shoulder as she laid her head on his chest, and they shared a delightful moment of peace.

“Gods... we should have done this sooner,” she muttered half-jokingly, trailing her fingers over his collarbone.

The king nodded in agreement, wearing a satisfied grin from ear to ear. “Glad we got this second chance, though...”

“*Uh-huh...*” she concurred, basking in the sunlight seeping into the cabin through the curtains. It all felt so real, so warm, yet she knew it was not meant to last. “I wish life was always this simple...”

Puck remained silent for a moment.

“... Yeah... about that... *I’m sorry...*” he apologized, staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Huh? What for?”

“Y’know... dragging you into this mess,” he answered in a suddenly serious tone. “I had no idea things would escalate into a literal *holy war*, and the poison clouding my mind didn’t help matters. Still, nudging you into challenging *Berlioz* was a total dick move. I almost got you killed... *what kind of friend am I..?*”

The dragoon raised her head and locked eyes with him.

“Puck... I may have had my doubts at first, and I know dealing with *Berlioz* and *Ulrich* will be tough, even with *Reis* on our side, *but I want to do this*,” she reassured him, gently caressing his cheek.

The king averted his gaze in shame.

“I dunno, *Freya*... do you really want to spend the rest of your days chained to the throne? Or are you just trying to meet the unfair expectations we have heaped on your shoulders?” he asked.

Freya frowned.

“Look, I know I can be a bit of a people pleaser sometimes, but I’m not as naïve as you think...” she answered, climbing on top of him and pinning him to the mattress by the wrists. “I won’t sit on the sidelines while everything I love *burns*. Not anymore. Understood?”

Puck blinked dumbly at her for a moment, completely lost in her gorgeous jade eyes.

“Understood...” he answered, a loving smile on his lips.

KLANG!

“... *That all you’ve got?!*” Freya exclaimed, deflecting a monstrous claw with a swing of the Dragon’s Hair.

“*Shut up and dance, rat!*” Berlioz retorted, twisting his body to deliver a devastating tail swipe.

SWOOSH!

“*Whoa! Too close..!*” the knight thought, narrowly dodging the barbed appendage; she knew all the Dreki needed to win was a single decisive

strike, so she played it safe, studying his patterns while waiting for an opening.

“Even with the power of a goddess you’re still running away!” the Völsung cackled as he stood on his hind legs. The nooks between his scales glowed with purple light, heralding his flame breath.

“*Now or never!*” Freya thought, rapidly channeling energy into her legs.

STAB!

“*Urgh!*” Berlioz grunted, nearly losing his footing; the dragoon had closed the gap in a blink with a high-speed leap and plunged her spear into his neck. Had his spirit armor not absorbed the brunt of the impact, she would have punctured his throat in her first successful attack. “*HOW DARE YOU, VARMINT!*”

“Uh-oh...” Freya said, noticing the glowing fractures on the earth beneath them. She planted her feet on the Dreki’s neck and backflipped, pulling the Dragon’s Hair out of the wound at the same time. A *massive* pillar of fire erupted from the ground, engulfing the Allfather and setting everything ablaze, but by then she had put a safe distance between them.

“*CRESCENT!*” he screamed at the top of his lungs, activating the gigantic Dragon’s Crest on his chest. An army of wraiths emerged from their mystical prison, chasing after the knight like howling hellhounds.

“**Need a hand?**” the Beast’s voice echoed in Freya’s mind, much to her relief.

“*About godsdamn time!*” she exclaimed as a blinding aura shrouded her, turning her flesh into burning steel. The empowered dragoon then rocketed skyward, the sheer power of her jump *cracking* the rocks beneath her feet. Thanks to her timely evasion, some of the spirits missed her and crashed into the ground, but most of them turned in mid-air like heat-seeking missiles and kept coming after her.

“*Huh... this gives me an idea..!*” she thought, a sly smirk on her lips. “**This way, dimwits!**” she taunted them, abruptly changing course with the ghosts still in hot pursuit, and flying straight at Berlioz.

“**IT’S NOT GONNA WORK!**” the Völsung barked, spewing concentrated flame blasts at the knight, so dense that they looked like lava jets, but she jinked out of the way every time without

breaking a sweat. “*GRAAAGH!*” Berlioz roared in frustration, suddenly splitting the magma stream into a massive volley of fireballs.

“*Dammit! Dead end!*” Freya thought, but then she noticed a gap in the fusillade large enough for her to fit through. “**Alright, here goes nothing!**” she said, barrel-rolling like a hummingbird into the swarm. The heat became nigh-unbearable as the abyssal flames licked her armor, but she pressed on without hesitation. Unable to follow her, the revenants crashed right into the scorching wave, leaving her attack plan in shambles and forcing her to improvise.

“WHAT?!” the Dreki uttered in total disbelief as the knight emerged unscathed from hell itself.

“**EAT THIS!**” Freya roared, hoisting the Dragon’s Hair over her head. Its blade shone a bright green as she loaded it with spiritual energy, but Berlioz, who was no stranger to the spear’s powers, shielded himself with his wings and widened his stance to better absorb the attack.

FWOOOOM!

The Allfather grunted in pain as a gust of razor-sharp wind hit him, nearly knocking him off

balance. Despite the shallow cut the technique inflicted on him, once again his defensive forcefield proved too tough to penetrate, much to the dragoon's dismay.

"You disgrace the Dragon's Hair with your weakness!" the Völsung guffawed, victoriously spreading his bleeding wings.

"... I need to find a way around that aura..!" the Burmecian thought, hovering out of reach in case the false god attempted something. Her eyes widened all of a sudden. *"Wait a second... I got it!"* she thought, channeling her energy into her spear until it glowed an iridescent pink.

"Oh? That spell again?" Berlioz sneered. "Out of tricks already?"

"Mother Reis... give me strength..." the dragoon whispered, and the blade's radiance increased *tenfold*.

"... Interesting... bring it," the Allfather said with a smirk.

"Careful, Freya... if one of you dies, thousands will pay the price..." Reis warned her through their telepathic link.

“Wait, what do you mean ‘one of you’?!” the knight squawked. “This can’t possibly kill him... right..?”

“... He’s bluffing, but you’ve cut him twice, more than anyone ever has...” the goddess answered. “Because of its opposite natures, the Cherry Blossom can cancel out the Dragon’s Crest, leaving him open for a direct strike... and now that you’re powerful enough to hurt him...”

“... What am I supposed to do now..?” Freya thought, as she realized that by attacking Berlioz, she was essentially gambling with the fate of everyone in Folkvángur... including her family. “I-I don’t know if I can do this..!”

“What’s wrong, rat?! What are you waiting for?!” the Völsung boomed.

“Do it, honey...”

The knight gasped.

“Mom..?” she mumbled, and the glow of the Dragon’s Hair decreased as she recognized Frigg’s voice over the soul link.

“What?! I WON’T BE LOOKED DOWN ON BY A MORTAL!” the Allfather howled, utterly

KRA-KOOOOOOOOOOOM!

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“*Nnngh..!*” the knight croaked as the world slowly came back into focus. She tried to get up, but a sharp pain stopped her dead in her tracks. “*A-Arggh!*” she yelped; her right arm was mangled beyond recognition, and at least two of her ribs were broken.

“You... arrogant... *varmint*...” Berlioz wheezed, lying in a pool of his own blood with a gaping hole where his heart used to be. “How dare you... hold back against... *me..!*”

“Oh gods, I’m so sorry..!” the knight apologized, feebly rising to her feet. “I didn’t mean to...”

The Allfather chuckled laboriously.

“... *Hurt me?* Heh... I should thank *you... you’ve enlightened me...*” he stated, much to the dragoon’s confusion. “Allow me to repay the favor...”

The Völsung's wounds shone a bright purple, and his flesh began to rot and decay at an alarming rate, as if the magic holding it together had been dispelled. Something large started *moving* within the fallen god's carcass, causing it to bulge repulsively. Suddenly, a clawed hand erupted from its stomach, and a tall, humanoid creature emerged from the corpse, its albino body covered in blood and glowing veins.

"*Reis..?*" the knight thought, feeling nauseous. "*What's going on..?*"

"*Unbelievable... you actually killed his body...*" the goddess stammered, still reeling from the shock. "*I'm surprised Folkvángr remained stable... he must have bound it to that scion...*"

"*Scion..?*"

"*A new vessel for his soul, born from his own remains...*" the Allmother explained. "*Artificial reincarnation... his spirit magic really has come a long way...*"

"You flatter me, but you're only half right," the reptilian creature intervened, its mouth twisted into a shark-teethed grin.

"You can hear my thoughts?!" Freya squawked.

“What do you mean?” Reis asked. “You’re still Berlioz, right..?”

“Indeed... but you said soul, *in singular...*” the scion retorted as purple lightning arced around him, and the telltale aura that preceded a Trance began to manifest. “**We are *many*...**”

“... *Oh, no...*” the dragoon muttered, bracing for the inevitable.

FWOOOSH!

Freya frantically looked in all directions.

“*Where did he go?!*” she thought.

“*Behind!*” Reis exclaimed.

“Dammit..!” she said, sidestepping at the last second.

SNIKT!

“*Agh!*” she yelped; Berlioz had tried to tear her head off with his claws, but her timely dodge, plus Brahne’s helmet, allowed her to survive the attack with only a cut on her cheek. “*He’s too fast!*”

“**Over here!**” the Völsung taunted the knight, surprising her with a punch to the gut that bent her

breastplate *inwards*, **BLAM!** followed by a knee to the face that cracked her helmet open like a walnut, **TWHACK!** and a vicious uppercut that catapulted her into the atmosphere, **WHAM!**

“*Yaaargh!*” she screamed, blinded by the pain.
“Trance... I need a Trance... *now..!*”

“**What’s wrong? Tired already?**” Berlioz sneered, suddenly appearing next to her in mid-air. “***Let me entertain you while you catch your breath!***” he roared, grabbing her by the neck and slamming her head-first into the ground.

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TWHOOOOM!

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Before the dust settled, Berlioz sat on top of the barely conscious knight and began raining down punch after punch until his hands were drenched in Burmecian blood.

BLAM!

BLAM!

BLAM!

“*Get... OUT!*” Freya screamed, brusquely driving her hips upwards to throw her opponent off balance. The Dreki nearly fell flat on his face, and she used the opportunity to clutch onto his body, preventing him from resuming the assault. The dragoon then trapped his right arm under her armpit and rolled sideways until she was on top of him.

“*Where’s your honor, you piece of..?!*” she yelled, raising her fist, but her massive internal injuries suddenly caught up with her. “*Gwhk..!*” she gurgled, coughing up blood. Her vision became blurry as her strength abandoned her, and she toppled over onto her back.

Somewhat disappointed, Berlioz got up and prodded her with his foot to see if she would react.

“Dammit... just when things were getting interesting...” he grunted, kneeling beside his opponent. **“Can’t you do something, Reis? Rats are your specialty, not mine.”**

“*Freya..? Freya... listen to me...*” Reis’s voice echoed in the dragoon’s mind.

“*I can’t... I can’t feel my legs...*” she mumbled, desperately struggling to remain conscious.

“I know, dear... I’m going to patch you up, but you need to stay with me, okay? Stay with me.”

“O-Okay...”

“Hmph. Don’t take too long, woman...” the Allfather huffed, wandering off to give them some space.

Crick... crack...

“Hrrrrgh..!” the knight grunted as the goddess’ magic hastily popped her joints back into place and mended her broken body.

“This is going to hurt, but we’re almost done... you ready?”

The dragoon drew a few shallow breaths.
“Alright... I’m rea—”

SNAP!

“Owww! Fffffuck..!” she yelled as she rolled on her side. *“Arrrrgh..!”*

“Sorry for that... how are you feeling?”

“Angry...” Freya grunted as she propped herself up with the Dragon’s Hair. *“Two questions: how many people are linked to me right now?”*

“... Nine...”

The implications of that statement sent chills down her spine.

“I see... can you bind Folkvágr to another master, in case something goes wrong?”

The goddess made a pause.

“... I think so.”

The knight bared her gritted teeth. **“No more doubts, then...”** she declared, and a fiery aura wreathed her, turning her flesh into white-hot steel.

“Heh... you’re awfully cocky for a walking corpse,” Berlioz said, summoning his winged spear to his hand.

“Guess that makes two of us,” Freya retorted, waving him closer. the Allfather’s smirk deepened until it became a murderous grimace.

The two warriors charged at each other, leaving a blazing trail in their wake, and the shockwave caused by the clash of their weapons fractured the earth beneath their feet.

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TWHOOOM!

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**“All that power in the hands of an amateur!”** the Allfather guffawed. Freya pushed his polearm away and unleashed a flurry of rapid-fire jabs. However, the Völsung swiftly dodged each blow and countered with a brutal hew, aiming for the knight’s calf. **KLANG!** the spears went as she deflected his blade with her own, using the opportunity to close the distance and smash his face in with the butt of her weapon.

**BLAM!**

**“Unf!”** the Völsung uttered, nearly losing his footing.

**“Your spirit armor has weakened...”** Freya remarked. **“What’s wrong? Tired already?”**

**“I’ve got more than enough energy left to kill you!”** Berlioz retorted.

The dragoon switched to a one-handed grip and launched a ranged thrust at her opponent’s gut, but he repelled it with the shaft of his spear, closed the gap, and answered with an overhead strike that nearly blindsided her. **BLAM!** their weapons went,

and the hill *quaked* under the might of his blow, but Freya took advantage of the situation and tried to kick him in the chest.

***GRAB!***

“***Agh..!***” she grunted; he had caught her foot by the ankle and was squeezing it so hard she thought it’d snap in half.

“*Lindblum ’78! Remember that fight!*” Sir Wulfweard exclaimed through their telepathic link, and Freya immediately spun with her other leg, using the Völsung’s grip as leverage to jump and nail him in the jaw with a flying back kick.

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***CRACK!***

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Berlioz screamed as the tremendous impact sent him tumbling downhill. Freya kipped up to her feet and chased after the god, spear in hand.

“***I won’t tolerate this humiliation..!***” he snarled, using his superior agility to regain his foothold and charge at the knight at breakneck

speed. She angled her weapon to parry him, but he changed direction at the last second, flanking her so fast that he seemed to have teleported behind her. **“Gotcha!”**

***“Shi-!”***

^V^V^V^V^

***SQUELCH!***

V^V^V^V^

Freya howled in pain; Berlioz had run his blade through her left shoulder, nearly tearing her arm right off.

***“And now, for the fun part!”*** he roared triumphantly, using his spear like a catapult to send her flying into the clouds.

***FWOOOSH!***

The rain hit her face like bullets as she dove into the storm.

***“Freya! Can you hear me?!”*** Reis yelled, feeling her protégée teeter on the brink of unconsciousness.

***“I’m not... making any progress...”*** the dragoon croaked. ***“At this rate... he’s gonna kill us for***

***sure...***”

“No, he won’t! You had him on the ropes just now!” the goddess answered, healing her wounds as fast as she could.

***“He’s too powerful... I can’t even see him move at times...”***

“He may be fueled by an army of ghosts, but unlike you, he’s alone,” Reis retorted. “Use that to your advantage, and you’ll win.”

“I’m not alone...” the knight muttered to herself. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reached out telepathically for her friends and family.

**“There you are!”** the Allfather shouted, his arrival heralded by a flash of lightning.

***“Here he comes!”*** Reis exclaimed.

Freya opened her eyes at the last second and deflected Berlioz’s spear with a graceful swing.

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***KLANG!***

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**“Huh. Maybe you’re not as frail as I thought...”** the Völsung complimented her, readying a spell with his free hand, but the dragoon was faster on the draw.

**“Stop thinking, it’s not your forte,”** she answered, aiming her open palm straight at him.

**“What the..?!”** he uttered as a glowing Terran rune manifested before his eyes.

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***KRA-KOOOOM!***

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**“Uwaaaargh!”** the god screamed as he fell out of the sky, propelled by four gigajoules of raw energy to the face.

**“Yikes, Zid... we may have gone slightly overboard this time...”** Freya said, biting her lip.

**“Nah, he’ll be fine,”** the Genome answered nonchalantly. **“Nice one-liner, by the way.”**

**“Hah, thanks... for everything...”** the knight replied. **“Ready to go home, dragon pal?”**

*“I thought you’d never say it.”*

Like a falcon, the dragoon swooped down on the plummeting god. The storm raged on around her, getting worse by the second, but she was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she nearly failed to notice it.

*“What if beating Berlioz without killing him was actually possible..?”* she wondered, trying to be realistic about her situation. Even at his weakest, the Völsung was terrifyingly powerful, and she had only gained the upper hand by constantly surprising him... but she was running out of tricks and he still seemed no worse for wear. The Cherry Blossom was the only thing in her arsenal that had come close to defeating him, yet it had also accidentally jeopardized the fate of Folkváng and its inhabitants.

She wasn’t naïve about her role in this holy war either; killing or being killed were possibilities she had already accounted for, and the Allfather had proven too dangerous to be left unchecked. Still, Mikoto’s speech had deeply affected her, and she yearned for *a third outcome*; one in which she wouldn’t need to sacrifice anyone for her cause.

In order for Burmecia to change, the cycle of bloodshed had to end *right there and then*.

**“This is my world... my empire... I built it with my own hands...”** Berlioz snarled, snapping the knight back to reality. The Dragon’s Crest on his chest flared into life again, but this time its hue changed from its normal pale blue to a deep shade of purple.

*“He’s forcing his souls into a collective Trance... how unoriginal...”* a disembodied voice Freya couldn’t readily identify warned her.

***“This... is MY WORLD... AND YOU’RE NO LONGER WELCOME!”*** the Allfather roared, and the largest swarm of Drekar spirits in history *exploded* out of his body, so vast that the night turned to day, and not even the lightning could compete with its radiance.

***“This is it..! You ready, guys?”*** the dragoon exclaimed, channeling all of her energy into the Dragon’s Hair.

*“We have your back, honey!”* Frigg said, and the Crescent pendant began glowing intensely. Two spirits emerged from it and flew ahead, heading straight towards the incoming wave. Much to Freya’s surprise, they weren’t her parents, but a pair of Genomes she couldn’t believe were working together.

“Shall we hold the door for the lady?” Kuja quipped as he readied an Ultima spell.

“*Let’s give ’em hell, brother!*” Zidane answered, casting his biggest Grand Lethal yet.

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***KRA-KOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!***

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Freya had to close her eyes and cover her ears; even with Reis’s powers, the resulting blast was so destructive that it nearly blinded and deafened her simultaneously.

“*Survivors! Watch out!*” Frigg yelled. The dragoon gasped; some wraiths had gotten past the siblings’ barrage.

“*It’s now or never!*” Kain exclaimed as his soul burst out of the pendant, along with Frigg, Fridgeir, Wulfweard and Puck’s. Freya aimed her spear at Berlioz’s heart, and her guardian spirits burst into a whirlwind of cherry blossom petals, shielding her from the howling phantoms.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^

***KABOOOOOOOOOOOM!***



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The resulting explosion set the skies ablaze and scattered the storm clouds, allowing the sun to gloriously shine through.

**“... *Did I get her..?!*”** the Allfather wondered, shielding his eyes from the blast with his hand.

After a moment, a silhouette emerged from the flames, still flying at him.

**“*No way... she couldn’t possibly..!*”** he panicked, but then he realized the figure wasn’t actually Freya, but a young warrior he knew all too well: *King Athelric himself*.

Berlioz’s eyes widened at first, but then he closed them and smiled peacefully.

**“*I see... so you’ve finally come for me...*”** he muttered.

His Trance died out and his spirit armor evaporated, but he couldn’t care less. If Athelric, *of all people*, was so disappointed in him that he would side with his enemies, then he had no reason to keep fighting anymore.

**“*I’ve been so lonely, old friend... why did you leave me behind..?*”** he whispered, opening his arms

to welcome death. *“It doesn’t matter now... I’m glad to see you again...”*

Then his body hit the ground at terminal speed.

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***KER-KRAKKK!***

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*“Ugh...”* Berlioz croaked as he slowly regained consciousness. The first thing he noticed was the cold cobblestone floor against his back, then the

warmth of the sunlight seeping into the throne room through a large hole in the ceiling. “Where..?”

“Welcome back...” Freya greeted him, sitting on a large piece of rubble. “Looks like we’ve crash-landed right into the Royal Palace... ironic, don’t you think?.”

The Allfather confusedly looked around and *flinched*: the Dragon’s Hair had been driven deep into the ground, mere inches to the right of his head.

“Why..?” he grunted. “Why did you spare me..?”

The knight sighed.

“... Must I repeat myself? I’m not here to fight you,” she said, offering him her hand.

The Völsung slapped her arm away and tried to get up on his own, but his legs gave way under him and he collapsed in an exhausted heap.

“Accepting help doesn’t make you weak, you know?”

“... I hope you’re having fun lecturing me like that... because when I’m back on my feet again, I will *erase* that smile from your face...” he growled, shivering from the pain.

“I’m not smiling. No one is,” she retorted, pulling her spear out of the ground. “Tell me, Berlioz... do you think Athelric is smiling right now?”

Outraged, the Dreki opened his mouth to insult her, but the lump in his throat prevented him from talking.

Freya sat down next to him.

“... The world is changing, and we must adapt to survive... but that doesn’t mean we will forget who we are,” she said. “Puck knew it, and I’m sure that, deep down, *so do you*. That’s why you chose me over Ulrich, didn’t you?”

The Allfather remained silent, yet the knight understood he was conceding the point in his own taciturn way.

“Look... I know clinging to the past is tempting... we’ve lost so much, and our lives will never be the same...” she said, gazing at the sky through the hole in the ceiling. “... but *hey*... we’re still here, right? And I believe we can rebuild our nation... stronger, fairer, and better than it ever was.”

The way the sun played tricks with her hair brought long-forgotten memories to Berlioz’s mind.

“*You’re only half right...*” he answered, his voice a hoarse whisper.

“Oh..? About what?” she asked.

“I chose you because at times... you remind me of *him...*”

She couldn’t help smiling. “How so?”

The Völsung let out a wry chuckle, but his aching bones cut it short.

“... He was just as annoyingly idealistic...” he croaked. “... and beautiful... so *beautiful...* he meant everything to me.”

“What happened to him..?” the knight asked, knowing she was treading potentially dangerous waters.

The Dreki averted his eyes.

“... He passed away a year before Folkvágr was completed...” he replied. “I was too late... too *weak* to save him...”

Freya lowered her gaze. She knew exactly how that felt.

“Oh... I’m sorry...”

The seal on her shoulder suddenly began to change on its own, billowing and shifting like ink in clear water, until it became an iridescent amalgam of the Dragon's Crest and Reis's emblem.

"Huh..? is this..?" she stammered, shocked beyond words; *the Allfather had finally granted her his blessing.*

"... Perhaps you're right..." Berlioz muttered, gently closing his eyes. "Maybe the only way to preserve his legacy... is to set it free."

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### **Author's note:**

Two years. I've been planning this chapter for over two years, and seeing it finally published brings a tear to my eye T^T

I have a few things to share. First, I'd like to dedicate this chapter to **Janet K. Wallace**, an amazing musician, prolific fic writer, and a dear

friend of mine, who has composed a breathtaking song about Freya's journey. You can listen to it here: **sound cloud (dotcom) /user-86435371/the-last-cherry-blossom**

I also want to give a special thanks to my dragon pal **Brayden**, AKA **BloodyCrow534**, who's been helping me with my English writing, and took it upon himself to read a bazillion versions of this chapter until we found the right one XD He's also a fellow writer, and a damn good one, so go check out his works. You won't be disappointed!

As always, I want to thank all my readers, reviewers and followers for sticking with me despite my horribly slow writing rate; I wouldn't have gotten this far without your support, guys! :)

Only three chapters left! Freya's journey may be coming to an end, but it was an unforgettable ride. Thanks to you all for sharing this adventure with me!

Jota Te

## 42. Treason

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### **WARNING:**

*This chapter contains graphical depictions of torture and gore. Reader discretion is advised.*

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**April 2nd, 1820, Refugee Camp (Burmecian Sector), Alexandria.**

**06:45**

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“... When will we go home, daddy?”

Svend Gundersen nearly choked on his coffee. Coughing, he set his steel mug on the folding table and raised his eyes to meet his daughter's, unsure about how to explain the situation at hand to her.

“Ari...” the bandaged Burmecian muttered, fighting against the sudden tightness in his throat. “I’ve already told you... the old house isn’t safe right now. Besides, all of our friends are here. We’ll be safer if we stick together.”



“But daddy! Lady Freya and Uncle Osbern already killed all the monsters! They can’t hurt us now!” the girl retorted, and her father had to hold back the tears. If only she knew about the ragtag death squads that roamed the city at night, hunting their kind in retaliation for the invasion...

“We don’t know that for sure, honey,” he lied to preserve her innocence; How was he supposed to tell a nine-year-old that she could no longer trust humans, and that even some of the other Burmecian refugees would happily backstab them for their meager possessions?

“*Hey bro! You there?*” a friendly voice quietly called for him from outside the tent, yanking him back to reality.

“Honey, finish your breakfast, I’ll be right back,” Svend said, limping towards the tent’s entrance. As he emerged from their temporary shelter and the frosty morning air flooded his lungs, a familiar face came into view, much to his relief. “Hi, Bernie... I wasn’t expecting you so soon...” he greeted his former comrade-in-arms, and the dragoon responded with a tip of his hat.

“What can I say? I’m just *that* good,” Sir Osbern languidly joked, handing him a rather heavy leather

suitcase. “Here, I rounded up your stuff last night as requested. Wasn’t easy with all those damn soldiers patrolling the rooftops.”

Svend opened the bag and checked its contents: clothes, papers and his life savings. “I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done for us...” he said, offering his old friend a handful of glistening golden coins. “Please, accept this as a token of my gratitude.”

“The fuck are you doing? Put that back in the bag before we get jumped!” Osbern hissed, keeping eyes and ears peeled for eavesdroppers. “Crossing the Lindblumese border will be tough after what happened. If something goes wrong, look for a short, red-haired Cleyran with an eyepatch camping in the woods east of Bohden Gate. His services aren’t cheap, but he has a few officers on his payroll, so he’ll get you two in, no questions asked.”

“You’ve saved our lives twice, Bernie. I’ll find a way to repay you as soon as possible...” Svend muttered, sheepishly bowing his head.

“No problem, bro. Now, bring li’l Ari, the boys are waiting to get you two out of town,” the knight answered, and his friend nodded in agreement before returning to the tent.

“Daddy... what’s going on?” the little Burmecian asked, sending a shiver down her father’s spine. He didn’t want her to realize what was going on, but he needed her to cooperate if they wanted to get out of the kingdom unscathed.

“Hey... why don’t we go on a little vacation, just you and me?” he asked his daughter, much to her confusion.

“A vacation..?” Ari repeated, her interest piqued by the sudden proposal.

“Yeah! What do you say we go to Lindblum for a few weeks? We could pay Auntie Gertrud and your cousins a visit! Oh, and maybe we could check out that new theme park everyone’s talking about, and eat all the Gysahl pickles we want!” he pressed on, trying his hardest to sound excited.

Ari’s jaw dropped overdramatically.

“... *Are we going to Mogland..? For real?!*” she squeaked, and her father smiled at her childish glee.

“Sure!”

The girl jumped off her folding chair and climbed onto her father’s lap to hug him, utterly overjoyed. Svend chuckled and held her tight, drawing strength

from that precious little moment to brave the hardships to come; He was ready to kill and die in a heartbeat, if that's what it took to give his daughter a future.

A muffled scream in the distance sent a shiver down his spine.

"Daddy... w-what was that..?" Ari stammered, her big, round eyes filled with dread.

"It's probably nothing, hun..." Svend lied, instinctively reaching for the hidden knife in his coat.

"*They're here!* We need to leave right now!" Osbern hissed, poking his head into the tent.

"They *who*?! Daddy, who's here?!"

Svend kneeled and grabbed his daughter by the shoulders, piercing her very soul with his panicked olive eyes.

"Ari... I need that, no matter what you see out there, you stay close and keep quiet until we reach the airport... this is extremely important, okay?"

"Uh... O-Okay..." the girl stammered, trembling in fear.

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**April 2nd, 1820, War Room, Alexandria  
Castle.**

**07:30**

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“You’re kidding me, right?” Garnet asked, massaging her temples in a futile attempt to relieve her throbbing headache.

“I really wish I was, ma’am,” Weimar of the Pluto Knights answered, marking three locations on the tabletop city map. “On top of the wave of hate crimes, riots have broken out here, here and here. Someone’s coordinating everything, that’s for sure; look at this...” he said, pulling a bloodstained knot of gold-trimmed black ribbons from his leather pouch.

“Looks like a cockade...” the Summoner observed, studying it from every angle. “What do we know about this?”

“Not much, except that the rioters wear these to identify themselves, but rest assured, we’ll find out who’s leading them.”

“Have they made any demands yet? What do they want?”

“Vengeance, first and foremost,” the officer stated. “They blame the Burmecians for the invasion, so they want them either executed or imprisoned...”

The queen averted her gaze, clenched her teeth and slammed her fist on the table, startling Weimar.

“We worked so hard to make amends... so *hard...*” she grunted, eyes full of tears. “*Why..? Why would they do this..? Why would they choose war again after all we’ve lost..?!?*”

“... Some wounds take longer to heal, Your Majesty... I’m sorry...” the knight stated, approaching her until he was within whispering range. “*I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there’s something else I need to warn you about. My sources informed me that the Royal Council plans to summon an emergency meeting today... rumors of treason are spreading through these very halls as we speak, ma’am...*”

Treason.

Even if Garnet expected as much from her rancid, decadent court, getting backstabbed at her most

vulnerable by the Council, after decades of devoted service to her people, was still devastating.

***BLAM!***

Garnet and Weimar gasped; Lydia, the newly appointed captain of Beatrix's unit, had thrown the door open with a panicked expression on her face.

"Your Majesty! We need to get you to a safe place immediately!" she said, clapping her fist on her chest and bowing her head.

"What's going on?!" the queen asked.

"Someone has infiltrated the castle and killed half a dozen guards with fire magic!" the captain frantically replied. "Our soldiers are searching for the intruder, but we have to assume the royal family is their target..."

"Fire magic..." Garnet muttered, feeling a sudden, primal dread slowly creeping through her spine. "Weimar... where's Tot..?"

"Tot..? Oh, you mean Prince Aristotle..! I believe he's studying at the library with Lady Kildea..."

Without losing a second, Garnet ditched her uncomfortable, high-heeled shoes, headed for the

door and brushed past Lydia, her heart thundering in her chest.

“Your Majesty, let us handle this! It’s too dangerous out there!” the captain said, chasing after the queen with Weimar in tow.

“Captain, assemble your unit and meet us at the library *asap*. We’re gonna need backup,” the Summoner ordered. “Weimar, follow me. I hope I’m wrong, but I think I know who we’re dealing with.”

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**April 2nd, 1820, Royal Library, Alexandria Castle.**

**07:35**

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“... In ancient Madain Sarian folklore, *Jinn* were powerful manifestations of the Crystal, much like the Eidolons. They were often summoned to the physical world through a forbidden blood ritual in order to exact revenge on their master’s enemies...”

Prince Tot sighed and rocked back and forth in his chair, trying not to fall asleep. He hated



mornings *and* history lessons with a passion, and the elderly Lady Kildea reciting myths from her book in a quivering, boring monotone wasn't helping matters either.

“... The word ‘*Jinn*’ is actually a collective noun, whose primary meaning is ‘*to hide*’ or ‘*to adapt*’. Some authors interpret the term to mean ‘*beings that hide in plain sight*’...” the old Cleyran scholar read out loud, and then she raised her gaze from the dusty tome in order to check if the young Genome was paying attention; Unsurprisingly, he wasn't. “Your Highness, are you listening to me?”

“Ah..! Uhh... yeah, *Yans... fascinating creatures...*” Tot blurted out, none too convinced.

The former forest oracle sighed and shook her head in exasperation.

“It's *Jinn*, not *Yan*...” she corrected him, pinching the bridge of her snout. “I've told you a million times, young sir... a prince needs to be well educated in order to become a competent leader. Don't you want to be a great king consort, just like your father?”

“I don't wanna get married...” Tot pouted, grumpily folding his arms.

The tutor obviously let a tiny snort escape, much to her student's indignation.

"*Not funny...*" the child grumbled, averting his gaze.

"Please, forgive my rudeness, Your Highness... I didn't mean to mock you," the elderly Cleyran apologized.

"... 's okay..."

"Also, please pardon my boldness, young sir, but I don't think you need to worry about that..." she added with a nearly toothless smile.

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, I've known your parents for a long, long time, Prince Aristotle. I'm sure they would never force you into a marriage of convenience..." the oracle speculated.

"You... *you mean it..?*" the boy stammered, looking so utterly *vulnerable* that his tutor just couldn't refrain from reaffirming her reckless declaration.

"I mean it," she answered, playfully ruffling the prince's hair. "Hey, why don't we..?"

***BLAM!***

“Wha..?” Kildea stammered, craning an alarmed look at the front door; five insurgents led by an imposing, plate-armored knightess had entered the library, all of them wearing the rebels’ colors and evidently looking for someone.

“*What is Mildred the Butcher doing here..?!*” Tot hissed, terrified by her presence; Mildred’s bloodlust was only matched by her ruthlessness, as she had caused so much collateral damage during the Trenoite rebellion that Garnet only refrained from court martialling her because of her immense popularity among the troops, so she had her assigned to a ceremonial post at the farthest corner of her kingdom instead, in hopes of never seeing her again.

“Whatever it is, it can’t be good...” the Cleyran answered, holding the Prince’s little hand. “Your Highness... I need you to hide right now. No matter what happens, you must *not* reveal yourself, understood?”

“But what about you?!” the Genome whispered, tugging at her embroidered sleeve. “I’m not leaving you alone with that *brute!*”

Lady Kildea reacted with a grateful, quivering smile at her student's bravery, but she had lived long enough to know how letting Mildred find the Prince would end.

*"She's coming..! Go, hide behind that bookcase!"* she hissed, pushing Tot away. *"Don't let them find you!"*

With teary eyes, the Prince obeyed her command and hid behind a centuries-old collection of Madain Sarian lore, hoping that if they didn't find him, they would leave Kildea alone. The tutor quickly grabbed Tot's handbook and buried it under a pile of parchment scrolls, seconds before the Butcher identified her.

"Forest witch! What a pleasant surprise!" Mildred sarcastically boomed, leaving her group and sitting at the elderly scholar's table with a perverse smirk on her lips. As she spoke, she ordered her soldiers to search the place with a wave of her hand. "I forgot Garnet allowed animals inside the castle! I should have brought my pets."

"You know you're not welcome here, B-Butcher," the teacher stuttered, ruining whatever semblance of confidence she had mustered.

“Whoa, relax, woman! *Jeez...* city rats have even fewer manners than their countryside brethren!” the knight mocked her, languidly reclining herself on her chair and resting her armored feet on the table.

“What do you want? I’m b-busy right now...” Lady Kildea asked, pretending to go back to her reading.

“Come on, oracle, you know why I’m here,” the Butcher answered in a bored tone, slowly drawing a large, jagged hunting knife from its sheath. Its blade gleamed menacingly under the candlelight as she absentmindedly watched her own reflection in it. “Give me the kid and I’ll let you walk out of this room in a single piece.”

The elderly scholar swallowed the lump in her throat, completely aware that she wasn’t going to make it, no matter what she did.

“Kid? Do I look like someone who would b-bring *children* to a sanctuary like this?”

The renegade knight snorted, amused by the oracle’s pitiful attempt at deceiving her.

“Oooh, what’s this?” she said, picking up a scroll from the table. “It looks *ancient*, just like you! I wonder if it’s valuable...”

“Whatever you’re thinking, please don’t... *ah!*”

“Oops! Silly me...” Mildred crooned as the parchment roll spontaneously combusted in her hands and burned to cinder.

“That was the last remaining copy in existence of the Tale of the Summoner!” Ms. Kildea squawked, utterly horrified.

“No fucking way!” the Butcher ecstatically exclaimed, and then she speared another scroll like a fish with her knife, sinking it deep into the table.

***CRACK!***

“No! The Sacrobless Manuscript! Leave it alone!”

“*Then give me the kid!*” Mildred barked back, loading her blade with magic until it glowed like a red-hot fireplace poker.

“I told you already, there’s no..!”

***FWOOOM!***

“*Aaah! Nooo!*” Kildea exclaimed as the scroll turned to ash.

*“I’m getting tired of your shit!”* the knight roared, ripping her knife from the wood as she whistled an order to one of her goons. A rogue soldier grabbed Kildea by the wrist and forced her to put her withered hand on the table.

*“No... no... please...”* the forest oracle begged, on the verge of tears.

*“You’ve fucked with me long enough, rat. Now, I’ll fuck you up,”* the Butcher snarled, trailing the scholar’s cheekbone with the tip of her blade. *“Where’s Prince Aristotle?”*

*“I swear to Reis I don’t know!”* Kildea exclaimed, trembling in utter terror.

***CRACK!***

The old lady howled in pain as Mildred jammed her knife into her open hand so hard it punched right through the table.

*“You hearing that, brat?! This is your fault!”* the knight bellowed, relishing every second of the Cleyran’s agony.

*“He can’t hear you... I’ve already sent him with his mother...”* Lady Kildea hiccuped.

“Listen... I don’t know how things worked back in your fucking treehouse, but lying to an officer in Alexandria has *consequences*,” Mildred hissed, pulling the blade out of her flesh with a sickening *squelch*.

“*Yaaaaargh! Ah... ha ha... ha ha ha!*” Kildea laughed through the pain, bleeding profusely but still determined to protect the prince. “It’s over, Mildred... you’re gonna hang for this...”

“We’ll see about that...” the rogue knight answered, approaching the old tutor as two of her soldiers restrained her, forcing her to stand up. “Hey kid, it’s a damn shame you’re not here! I’m sure you’d have loved to watch this!”

***BLAM!***

“*Urk..!*” the oracle uttered, doubling up in pain as Mildred prepared to punch her again.

“Aw, c’mon, take it like a woman, will ya?” the Butcher mocked the Cleyran before decking her in the ear with a savage right hook, followed by a knee to the stomach.

“*STOP IT, PLEASE! YOU’RE KILLING HER!*” Prince Tot yelled, leaping out of his hiding spot in tears.



Mildred chuckled.

“D’aww... ain’t that cute? I knew he wouldn’t disappoint us,” she commented, holding the oracle’s bloodied face in her hand. “C’mere boy, I wanna show you something.”

“Will you let her go if I go with you..?” the prince asked.

“Of course, why wouldn’t I?” the Butcher sneered with a murderous smirk. “You’ve taught him well, treehouse witch... he’s a brave little monkey. How quaint.”

“Don’t listen to her, my lord! I’m already done for! Get out of here immediately!” Kildea shouted, only to get punched in the gut for her trouble.

***TWHAP!***

“*LEAVE HER ALONE!*” Tot cried out in desperation, balling up his little fists. “*I’ll go with you!*”

“Good boy! Tie him up, gals, we’re taking him to Her Majesty,” Mildred ordered, and once her soldiers had seized the blubbering child, she smiled maliciously and winked at him.

***STAB!***

“NOOOO!” the young prince shrieked, struggling to free himself from the thugs’ grip as the Butcher viciously sank her blade between Kildea’s ribs.

“W-Why..?” the Cleyran stammered, feeling her own life slowly ebb through her wounds.

“... Because the true queen of Alexandria is back from her exile, rat, and there’s no place in her new order for the likes of you...” Mildred whispered in the scholar’s ear before pulling the knife out of her body. Lady Kildea staggered and toppled over like a discarded doll, hitting the floor with the faintest of thuds. As her blood pooled over the pearly marble tiles, the young Genome began trembling with pure, unbridled rage. A new kind of hatred, unknown to him until then, burned him from the inside, making his very soul *boil* in his chest.

“Uhh... ma’am..?” a rebel said, realizing a second too late that there was something *off* about the prince.

***KER-ZAPPP!***

“What the..?!” Mildred spat, craning an alarmed look at the source of the noise; two of her underlings lied convulsing on the floor with their skin charred as if they had been set ablaze, and the prince was

still standing, glaring back at her with murderous intent. The Butcher cocked her head as she wiped the blood off her weapon, curious about the child's newfound abilities. "Would you look at that... the little monkey is a weirdo, just like his parents!"

The three surviving rebels drew their swords, but Mildred ordered them to back off with a hand gesture.

"You wanna kill me, monkey boy?" she asked, calmly approaching him with her hunting knife at the ready. "Why don't you give it a try? C'mon, hit me with your best shot."

"*Raaagh!*" the prince screamed, instinctively hurling a huge fireball at the knight with his bare hands, but she swatted it aside with her blade like it was nothing. The wayward spell hit a nearby bookcase, setting centuries of knowledge alight.

"A Fira spell, huh?" the Butcher commented, watching the dusty tomes burn as the flames encroached upon them. "Congratulations, boy, you've got potential... but not enough to beat me."

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up, **SHUT UP!**" the Genome howled, and the room temperature began to

drop rapidly until the rebels could see their own breath.

“W-What’s going on..?!” an insurgent stammered, noticing that a shimmering frost was forming beneath her feet.

Mildred looked down and quickly realized what was going to happen.

“It’s a Blizzaga spell! Get outta there!” she yelled, leaping out of the kill zone, but her companions weren’t fast enough to avoid getting impaled by the monstrous ice spikes that burst out of the floor in the blink of an eye. “Oooh, you’re gonna *pay* for that, *brat!*” she roared, lunging at the prince like a charging Zagnol, but before she could reach him, Weimar of the Pluto Knights kicked the door open, bringing Beatrix’s squad and Garnet with him.

**BLAM!**

“Stay away from him!” the Summoner barked as she launched a Blind spell at Mildred with pinpoint accuracy, forcing her to dodge it and retreat as the loyalist troops barged into the library. “Get her!” the queen ordered, and her soldiers cast a fusillade of deadly ice stakes at the Butcher, who immediately flipped a wooden table and used it as improvised

cover. Exhausted by the sheer energy drain, Tot staggered and fainted, creating an opportunity to escape that Mildred wasn't about to ignore.

“Hey, poser queen!” the rogue knight exclaimed, grabbing her weapon by the blade and loading it with fire magic until it glowed a scarlet hue. “Fetch!”

Garnet opened her eyes wide as the Butcher emerged from cover, poised to throw her knife at the unconscious prince. “No!” the Summoner screamed, pushing Weimar aside as she rushed to protect her son.

“Your Majesty, wait!” the Pluto knight exclaimed, caught completely off guard by her intervention.

“Die!” Mildred roared triumphantly, hurling her Firaga-infused knife at the prince before disappearing into the bookcase maze.

To her enforcers' dismay, Garnet threw herself between the projectile and her son; she knew that no matter which magical barrier she tried to put up, either the knife would pass right through it, or the collision would trigger the spell, killing everyone in the room. Time seemed to slow down to a crawl for

her as she aimed her index finger at the incoming blade and cast an enchantment.

“*Float!*” she yelled. A bright flash of light engulfed the knife, stopping it dead in its tracks mere *inches* away from her face. It then began hovering harmlessly in the air, still very much loaded with dangerously unstable magic.

“Freeze it over, now!” Lydia ordered, and her squad quickly encased the bomb in a block of solid ice while Weimar helped the queen carry both her son and Lady Kildea to safety. “It’s gonna blow, close the doors!” Lydia yelled, and as the troops pulled the wooden doors closed, the knife detonated, sending chunks of frozen shrapnel in all directions.

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**April 2nd, 1820, Alexandros Airport,**

**Alexandria**

**07:45**

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“We made it..!” Svend Gundersen sighed as the gilded gates of Alexandria’s first and largest airport

laid open before him.

“Whoa! I’ve never seen so many airships at once!” Ari ecstatically said, riding on her father’s shoulders. “Gosh, there’s so much people!”

Indeed, a bustling, colorful multitude of travelers hustled about, making the terminal feel utterly cramped despite its massive size.

*“This is the last boarding call for flight 903, nonstop service from Alexandria to Lindblum,”* the airport’s loudspeakers blared across the station, prompting Svend to check the number on his flight ticket.

“That’s our ship,” he stated, turning to face Sir Osbern for the last time. “I guess this is goodbye, old friend... thank you... please, take care of yourself...”

“Don’t worry, pal, we’ll meet again shortly,” the dragoon answered, playfully winking at Ari. “See ya, kiddo. Keep an eye on your father for me, okay?”

“Will do, Uncle Bernie! I’ll bring you Gysahl pickles!” the girl enthusiastically answered.

“Cool, I’ll be looking forward to that. Now go!” the knight replied, waving at the Gundersens as they disappeared into the crowd.

He spent a moment scanning the station for signs of trouble, but luckily nothing seemed out of place. Relieved, he made his way back to the main gate once he was sure Svend and Ari had safely boarded their airship, and it was at that moment when he noticed five armed soldiers with black and gold insurgent cockades heading towards the check-in counter, carrying a parchment scroll with the Royal Council’s seal on it.

“Aw, shit...” the dragoon muttered, realizing that getting any other compatriots out of Alexandria was about to become much, much harder.

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**Author’s note:**

**Holy duck, it’s been what, six months? But I’m finally back, yayyy!**

**If you’re wondering what I’ve been up to, well, I’ve been working full time with my team on our thesis, a sci-fi / action short film about VR gaming, social engineering and *love*. We’ve just**



**finished shooting it and now we're hard at work editing it. We'll probably release an online version in short order, so I'll let y'all know when it's uploaded in case you want to watch it!**

**I'm also celebrating The Last Cherry Blossom's third anniversary too! (Three years already? Dayum! o\_o), for that matter, I've uploaded a bunch of TLCB-related content to my TL, made by the amazingly talented Janet K. Wallace, and the legend herself, Myshu! If you wanna check it out, follow me on Twitter! (username: JotaTeOk)**

**It's good to be back. I hope you're all doing great! Stay tuned for more!**

## 43. Dead Ringer

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After what felt to her like an eternity compressed into a single instant, Lani slowly woke from her slumber.

Or so she thought.

*“Rise and shine, sleepyhead,”* a sarcastic voice greeted her, prompting the bounty hunter to sit up, utterly confused and nauseous.

*“Ughh... my fucking head... where are we..?”* she groaned at the hooded man who tended to their small campfire in the middle of nowhere. Its flickering light barely kept the pitch-black darkness at bay.

“We’re deep into the Spirit World... dangerously close to the Crystal, actually,” he offhandedly answered, his face framed in shadow despite the meagre flames’ radiance. “It’s almost a miracle I found you before it was too late.”

“The Spirit World..?” Lani parroted, nervously looking around. ‘Shouldn’t there be, like... y’know... spirits, to call it that?’ Her stomach

gurgled loudly, and she hunched forward, covering her mouth. “*Urk... I think I’m gonna puke...*”

“That’s a good sign. It means you’re not too far gone yet,” the stranger replied, producing a rough-skinned, glowing blue fruit from his traveler bag.

The mercenary stared at it for a moment, stumped by its otherworldly appearance.

“Sapphire dragon fruit, fresh from Lady Reis’s garden. Helps keep the soul sickness under control,” the man explained, chopping it with a knife and handing her a peeled slice.

“Soul sickness? Lady Reis? Okay, hold on a second, amigo. Who are you, and the fuck are you rambling on about?” Lani asked, distrustfully sniffing the creamy azure morsel. “... wait, *are you high?*”

“... You don’t believe in subtlety, do you?” the robed figure snorted. “All right, the undiluted truth, then. You’re dead, my brazen friend. Actually, we both are. Welcome to the Cycle of Souls.”

The bounty hunter burst out laughing, much to her campmate’s irritation.

“Oh my gods, you *were* stoned after all!” she cackled, eagerly chomping on the dragon fruit. “Man, this must hit even harder than Cactuar juice...”

“Actually, these are mostly used as a hangover cure,” he remarked.

Lani’s chewing slowed down to a halt.

“Really..? Welp, my disappointment is immeasurable, and my night is ruined...” she declared, licking her fingers. “Pretty tasty, though.”

“... Why does the rat even bother...” the stranger sighed, eye-rolling so hard that if eye rolls were audible, Lani would have gone deaf.

“You mean rat as in Burmecian? That’s racist, dude,” the merc calmly remarked, mentally steeling herself for a fight. “Speaking of ’Mecia... who sent you? Are you with the Jägers?”

“*Hah...* do I look like a Jäger to you?” the man scoffed, and as he pulled his hood back to reveal his identity, his long, white locks rolled down his shoulders like cascading moonlight, causing an utterly terrified Lani to nearly fall on her back.

“Y-You..! You’re that guy! Y-You killed Brahne and massacred her whole fleet!” she stuttered, pointing a quivering finger at Kuja; he looked older than she remembered, but it was definitely him. “It can’t be... you died! But if you’re here... it means I’m..!”

“... Dead?” the sorcerer smirked, taking sadistic pleasure in her reaction.

“Bullshit... *this is bullshit!* I’m outta here!” Lani spat, storming off into the inky darkness, but stopping right before she strayed too far away from the safety of the flames.

“And I thought I had a flair for the dramatic,” Kuja yawned, much to the bounty hunter’s chagrin.

“Shut it! I’m thinking!” she barked back, furiously scratching her left temple. “*I can’t be dead... this isn’t real... this isn’t real!*” she repeated to herself, trying her hardest to remember when, and most importantly, *how*, had she ended up stranded in such a nightmarish realm. A portal, perhaps? Or maybe she was just hallucinating, passed out in a ditch after having one too many ales.

“You demanded to know who sent me. Well, I’m here on Freya Crescent’s behalf,” Kuja stated, this

time successfully grabbing Lani's attention.

"Frey-Frey..?!" she gasped, covering her mouth. "Is she... dead too?"

"... You don't remember anything, do you?" Kuja commented, somewhat perplexed. "No, the rat lady is very much alive. Actually, she was about to risk her soul to come rescue you before I volunteered for the task. I owe her my freedom, after all."

Lani slowly returned to the camp and sat next to the fire, still reeling from the shock.

"What do you say we try a little experiment together? Indulge me, maybe we can figure out how you lost your memories," Kuja proposed after a moment in an uncharacteristically merciful tone. "What's the last thing you *do* remember?"

The bounty hunter sighed, folded her arms and closed her eyes. An unknown visage came to her from the foggy depths of her past.

"... I met a gal at a Lindblumese pub... she was desperate, looking for her missing younger brother, or so she said," Lani recalled, struggling to piece together their meeting. "She knew I used to be a bounty hunter, and wanted me to find the boy, but

there was clearly more to his disappearance than she let on...”

“Hmm... can you describe this woman?” the wizard asked.

Lani’s eyebrows shot up as she remembered a singularly noteworthy detail.

“There was something deeply weird about her, now that I think of it... believe it or not, she could have *easily* passed for Queen Garnet’s sister with a little makeup and some fancy clothes,” she remarked, eliciting an intrigued stare from Kuja. “A distant cousin, perhaps?”

“Unlikely... the whole Raza-Alexandros bloodline is long gone, and the Summoner tribe is 99.9% extinct. Believe me, we made sure of that,” the wizard replied matter-of-factly, sending a shiver down her spine.

“Well... maybe that 0.01% came back to bite me in the ass, because that bitch led me right into a trap,” she retorted, massaging her temples. “... She told me she had last seen her brother at the Theatre District, so I started my investigation there. Someone must have been following me, because the

moment I lowered my guard, I got bonked on the noggin. That's where my memory stops."

Kuja pensively rubbed his chin.

"So, there's a network of agents supplying test subjects to Bishop, and this... *doppelgänger* is part of it..." he muttered to himself, rubbing his chin. "... Or is Bishop supplying test subjects to *someone else..?*"

Lani opened her mouth to complain about Kuja's cryptic monologue, but an almost imperceptible sound interrupted her. Startled, she raised her foot only to discover a large, continuously growing crack in the ground, as if a silent earthquake was slowly tearing the Spirit World asunder.

"That must be Gizamaluke's magic..." Kuja remarked. "It appears my work here is done."

"Gizamaluke? The serpent god?!" Lani squawked, steering clear of a huge fracture that threatened to swallow their small campfire. "Please, don't tell me he's hunting us!"

"Listen close, Lani, for we have little time. That final remembrance of yours may prove instrumental in avenging your own death, and discovering the source of Treno's bootleg Terran weaponry," Kuja



stated as reality itself crumbled around them. “Once you return to the living world, tell Crescent and my idiot brother about this Garnet *lookalike*. If they fail to listen, make sure you find this woman and force her to reveal her true colors. Pull the thread by any means necessary. The fate of your planet may depend on stopping whoever is tampering with Terra’s legacy.”

The floor beneath Lani’s feet suddenly gave way as the cracks consumed everything, leaving her dangling from an unstable, protruding rock. Below her, the yawning void awaited. She yelped and desperately struggled to climb back up, but the crumbling wall prevented her from gaining purchase.

“What the fuck, Kuja, *help me!*” she yelled, but the wizard coldly turned around and left.

“Save your strength, woman. You’re about to need it,” he said calmly as the dimension collapsed, sending Lani screaming into the abyss.

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**April 2nd, 1820, Gaia One.**

7:15 A.M.

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*“Did it work..?”*

*“Gods... her finger twitched just now..!”*

*“Do you think she’ll attack, bro..?”*

*“Lord Gizamaluke claimed to trust her... but we’ll be ready in case he’s proven wrong...”*

Lani suddenly opened her eyes, sat up and screamed in confused pain, scaring everyone in the room out of their wits.

*“What the fu-?! Oowww, my brain!”* she squawked, clutching her temples. Coming back from the grave was anything but pleasant, as she had just found out.

*“Lani..! Is that you..?”* Freya asked, almost in a whisper. *“... Do you remember who I am?”*

*“Ugh... you kidding me, Frey-Frey? A mug like yours is hard to forget...”* Lani groaned, convinced that she had just woken up from a *wild* night at the tavern, and that her conversation with Kuja in the

Spirit World had been nothing but an alcohol-addled dream.

Freya's eyes welled up; *the resurrection ritual had actually worked.*

"Are you... *crying..?*" the mercenary asked, both baffled and concerned. She looked around, trying to assess her current situation; she was sitting on a comfy bed in what seemed to be a high-tech airship cabin (probably the captain's quarters judging by its size and amenities) surrounded by a monkey-tailed sibling duo, a tattooed crook who still held his sword's hilt in a terrified grip, and a *very* relieved Burmecian knight. "'Sup Marcus, long time no see."

"Geez, Lani... you almost gave me a heart attack," he sighed, finally releasing his weapon.

"Aw, c'mon, you never had a nightmare before?" she retorted, and then she gulped when she realized who the oldest Genome of the pair *actually* was. "*Uhh... Frey-Frey..? What is the prince consort of Alexandria doing here..?*"

Worried about how Lani's laid back attitude was putting everyone dangerously at ease, Mikoto grabbed the dragoon's wrist as soon as she tried to approach the mercenary.

“Careful... we don’t know if her implants are still operational...” Mikoto warned the knight, keeping her amplifying mask at the ready in case all hell broke loose.

“Implants? Oh, ho ho, *no*. These bad girls are 100% natural, kid. Thank you,” Lani smugly retorted, thumping a fist against her mangled chestplate, still blissfully unaware of the grotesque machinery jutting out of her scalp. “Weird... I don’t remember owning a suit of armor... wait, are those *bullet holes*?”

Freya, Zidane and Mikoto exchanged bewildered glances for a moment.

“Lani... what’s the last thing you remember?” the dragoon asked.

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After a short conversation with Lani, the group called an emergency meeting in the hallway, leaving the confused merc temporally confined in Mikoto’s cabin.

“A *second Garnet*?!” Zidane hissed right after closing the door behind him, his eyes open so wide that they seemed about to pop right out of their

sockets. “*Man...* just when I thought this year couldn’t get any weirder...”

“Why would Bishop employ such a conspicuous agent..?” Freya mused, folding her arms.

“Maybe she’s some kind of... uh... *golem*? Like Kuja’s black mages?” Marcus ventured, trying to avoid bringing up Zidane and Mikoto’s artificial origins.

“Speaking of him, I can’t believe he actually found Lani in the Soul Cycle..!” the Genome king remarked, marvelling at the implications of her unlikely comeback.

“No kidding...” Freya begrudgingly concurred. “If Lord Gizamaluke’s ordeal is anything to go by, he must have spent *decades* from his perspective scouring the Spirit World... for all his many, *many* faults, the man is *strong-willed*.”

“... Do you think the Crystal will take him in, Miko?” Zidane asked.

“Hundreds, possibly even thousands of Terran souls have already reincarnated on Gaia, so it’s safe to assume he will be fine,” Mikoto offhandedly reassured him, checking on Lani through a porthole window. “Honestly, I’m much more concerned about

this *doppelgänger* story... just how much Terran technology has Bishop garnered..? Does she intend to replace Garnet with a clone..?”

“That would be *waaay* too far-fetched, even for her, don’t you think?” Zidane said, mostly trying to convince himself. “I mean, even if she *was* identical, she wouldn’t fool people for long without Dag’s personality or memories, right?”

“Yeah... it’s unlikely that she intends to swap queens without us noticing. Too impractical. Still, we must find this *twin* and uncover her connection to Treno if we want to figure out what Bishop’s endgame is...” the scientist concluded.

“What about Lani..?” Zidane asked in a worried tone. “Someone has to tell her about her... *transformation*...”

An awkward silence grew between the four companions.

“I’ll do it,” Freya volunteered, unfolding her arms. “I really hope she can handle it...”

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**7:30 A.M.**

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Lani's first reaction to the dragon knight's story was to stare blankly at her for a moment. After a few seconds of silent disbelief, she reached for the mind control device embedded in her head with a tremulous hand.

"W-What is this..?" she stuttered, horrified by the unnatural feel of steel beneath her fingertips. "A mirror... *I need a mirror!*" she barked, scrambling towards the cabin's toilet. In a blind panic, she nearly tore the door off its hinges as she barged into the cramped facility, only stopping when she finally found herself face to face with her mutilated reflection.

"... Frey-Frey... what did they do to me..?" she whimpered, utterly *devastated*. Gizamaluke had mended her wounds to the best of his abilities, but the mercenary's body and the bizarre alien machinery keeping it alive were so intimately intertwined that not even *Reis* knew how to untangle them without permanently damaging her brain.

On the verge of hyperventilation, Lani fumbled desperately with her armor's various seals and latches until the damaged breastplate decoupled itself and hit the floor loudly, revealing just how

extensively Bishop's scientists had defiled her body with experimental magitek.

"No..." she choked on the word; grotesque tubes and wiring infested her flesh like synthetic maggots, and whatever actual skin she had left was nothing but a rugged tapestry of both old battle scars and fresh, surgical ones.

A heartrending wail echoed across the ship.

Zidane, Marcus and Mikoto immediately barged into the adjacent room, fearing for Freya's safety, but they found the knight sitting on the bathroom floor, tenderly holding a distraught, blubbering Lani.

"It's okay... let it all out..." the dragoon whispered in her ear, reassuring her friends at the same time with a subtle nod of her head.

Lani wasn't one to let other people see her weep, even if she had spent the last few years crying herself to sleep. However, realizing that any chance she had at a normal life had been utterly *destroyed* the moment she let Bishop capture her was simply too much to bear, so she let her tears flow unimpeded against Freya's blouse.

*"How am I supposed to go on like this..? I'm a monster..."* she stammered, trembling miserably in



the knight's arms.

“Monster? Please, you’re no monster...” the Burmecian spoke in a hushed voice, stroking what remained of the mercenary’s hair. “The real monsters are the ones we’re about to hunt.”

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**8:40 A.M.**

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By the time the Gaia One and the Madeen had crossed the border and re-entered Alexandrian air space, the sun had already pierced through the morning fog, laying bare the lush beauty of the Mist Continent. A few lazy clouds crowned the Aerbs mountaintops, and from her vantage point at the edge of the airship’s deck, Freya imagined they were islands in the sky.

“Wow... this is just like the first time we visited Chocobo’s Paradise... remember that?” Zidane said out of the blue as he sat next to the knight. His sneaky ways refused to die out, she observed, for his silent footsteps presented a challenge even to her inhuman senses.

“You mean the time I nearly broke my neck when you fed Choco those nasty peppers? That should be considered animal abuse,” the dragoon retorted, eliciting a hearty chuckle from her friend.

“Aw, c’mon Freya, I know you look a little weird, but I’d never call you an animal,” the king countered, earning himself a punch on the shoulder. “Ow! That was *one* witness away from a diplomatic incident!”

Freya smirked viciously, much to Zidane’s dismay.

“Diplomatic incident? Consider this a *war declaration!* C’mere, you little runt!” she exclaimed, pulling him into a surprise headlock.

“Too tight..! *Urk..!*” Zidane helplessly gurgled, barely managing to wriggle out of the Burmecian’s iron grip. “*Geez..!* and I thought *Baku* played rough.”

“Uh, sorry..! I’m still getting used to the Crest’s power... are you okay..?” she asked, feeling quite stupid.

“I’ll live, no thanks to you,” he huffed dramatically, feigning indignation as he raked his fingers through his long, golden locks. “... Jokes

aside, how are you holding up? You didn't look so hot when we returned from Cleyra."

The knight languidly leaned on the railing, too emotionally drained to cobble together an explanation. Zidane immediately caught on what she was going through, so he limited himself to gently rubbing her back, if only to let her know he was there for her. She smiled melancholically and rested her head on his shoulder; the whole situation reminded them of their very first shared misadventures, back when they were nothing but a pair of lost brats, looking for a place to call home.

A passing flock of Garudas briefly interrupted the silence as the ship approached the kingdom's capital.

"I've only been here for a few hours, and I already miss everyone..." Freya sighed, instinctively reaching for her mother's pendant. "My new responsibilities aren't the only things I'll have to adapt to..."

At first, the Genome found himself at a loss for words. He knew it wasn't the time for a hollow pep talk, but he desperately wanted to give his friend some peace of mind. She deserved it more than anyone else.

“... I know we won’t be travelling together for much longer, but that doesn’t mean you’ll be alone,” he finally declared, offering her one of his disarmingly corny smirks. “No matter what happens, I’ll always have your back, Ratface.”

Freya chuckled, closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, revelling in the sun’s warmth.

“And I’ll always have yours, monkey boy...” she promised.

Zidane grinned, satisfied, and thought, even if just for a moment, that everything was going to be all right.

*Then he noticed they were being followed.*

“The fuck..?” he uttered, squinting at the two incoming airships; they belonged to the Alexandrian air force, there was no doubt about it, but the interception felt a little too aggressive for a mere escort mission.

“Please tell me they are just the welcoming committee...” Freya half-joked, dreading yet another aerial confrontation.

“No... something’s off... let’s go back inside,” the Genome answered.

...

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***Author's note:***

I know six months is a *long* time, but even if Adult Life (TM) insists on interfering, I still intend to give this story the conclusion it deserves.

Thanks for putting up with my shitty publishing frequency, I really appreciate it :3

## 44. The Summit (Part One)

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April 2nd, 1820, Gaia One.

8:55 A.M.

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“Why won’t they answer our calls..?” Mikoto mumbled. A single drop of sweat was running down her brow as Zidane and Freya barged into the Gaia One’s bridge.

*“Maybe our radio is busted?”* Cinna ventured through the intercom.

*“Gaia One, Gaia One, this is Madeen!”* Eiko’s voice blared through the loudspeakers, debunking the brigand’s theory. *“You seein’ this shit?! Over!”*

*“... No offense, Miko, but I’m no stranger to smuggling runs, and we ain’t packing enough heat to deal with two AT-MOS frigates at once,”* Marcus commented from his post at the main battery.

*“Maybe Eiko could give us a hand? Summon a giant flea from outer space or something?”* Cinna suggested.

“*Whoa*, slow down, guys! Chill!” Zidane cut in, horrified at the prospect of preemptively shooting down his own troops. “Can’t we just shake ’em, Miko?! You said this was the fastest ship on the planet!”

“Maybe *we* could, but Eiko is both too close to them *and* outnumbered... she would get gunned down if we stepped out of line...” Mikoto stated as her thumb hesitatingly hovered over her microphone’s talk button.

“*Fuck..!*” Zidane spat, raking his fingers through his hair in desperation, and then he squinted when he noticed something weird in the rear camera’s video feed. “Wait a minute... Miko, look at the lead ship!”

The scientist’s eyebrows arched up as she glanced at the floating holographic display; one of the pursuing frigates had caught up with Eiko’s ship, but instead of attacking, it was gently flying in a zig-zag pattern next to the Madeen.

“Looks like they’re trying to convey a message...” Freya commented. “A threat, maybe?”

“Not yet... they’re ordering us to follow them,” Zidane answered.

*“Gaia One, Gaia One, this is Madeen!”* Eiko called through the radio. *“Can’t believe I’m saying this, but we’re being intercepted by none other than the Pluto Knights! Over!”*

*“The Pluto Knights?! Are you sure?!”* the Genome squawked, deftly stealing the microphone from Mikoto’s hands, much to her surprise.

*“Unless I’m hallucinating Dojebon’s ugly mug, then yeah, he’s most definitely waving at us from his ship,”* the princess of Lindblum claimed. *“Poor guy’s aged like fine milk, yikes... over.”*

*“Aw c’mon Eiko, it ain’t his fault he’s aesthetically challenged. What the hell is he doing so far from the castle, though..?”* Zidane wondered, scratching the back of his head in utter confusion.

*“My thoughts exactly...”* Freya commented, her furrowed brow betraying her concern. *“Why them? Why here?”*

*“... Well, there’s only one person in Alexandria who could and would have sent Dojebon to fetch us... and that’s Dagger,”* the king answered, increasingly unsettled by the idea. *“Miko, get ready to change course, please; we’re following them.”*



It wasn't hard for Zidane to figure out their destination after tailing the Pluto Knights for a while, but he couldn't think of any positive reason why Garnet would have led them there.

"*Shit...*" he muttered as the walls of a stone fortress carved into a cliff came into view.

"What is *that*?" Mikoto asked, marveling at the sight of the strange hanging stronghold.

"That's the Birdcage, a relic from the civil war," the king consort stated. "It used to be a bunker for the royalty, for when things got too spicy at the capital, but it hasn't seen any actual use in over a century. Just what is Dagger doing there..?"

A collective shudder ran down the backs of the crew.

"I don't know, brother, I don't like this at all..." Mikoto said, reluctantly keeping their flight course steady despite herself. "What if Bishop is luring us into yet another trap? Nobody will know what happened to us if we get ambushed in the middle of nowhere..."

Zidane smirked.

“If they’re planning to catch us, then they better bring a big fucking net because two master thieves, the smartest woman alive, a demigoddess, half the Madain Sarian pantheon and Cinna are heading their way,” he declared confidently.

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**April 2nd, 1820, the Birdcage, Alexandria.**

**9:25 A.M.**

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Like a flight of majestic iron dragons, the three airships docked in the Birdcage’s ample port amidst the roar of engines and turbines. As the tempest subsided, Queen Garnet hurried to the suspended catwalk leading to the quays, escorted by the Regent of Lindblum, Cid Fabool, and the recently reformed Royal Guard.

As soon as he noticed his wife approaching the Gaia One, Zidane leaped off the airstair and closed the distance between them in a heartbeat, a year’s worth of pent-up longing threatening to tear his chest asunder. Garnet didn’t hesitate either and dove into his arms with such force that a lesser man would have been knocked cleanly off the platform.

Then, they melted into a long, passionate kiss, court etiquette be damned.

“Geez... I can practically *smell* the prose going purple right now...” Eiko sighed as she politely declined her foster father’s offer to carry her hefty travel bag, fearing the exertion would end up injuring him. “Thanks dad, I can do it myself.”

“Sometimes I feel these two live in a literary genre of their own,” Marcus added with a smirk.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed you...” Zidane blurted out, lovingly caressing the queen’s visage. “When the Pluto Knights intercepted us, I... I thought...”

“Too much has happened today, honey, but we’re fine...” Garnet interrupted him, fearing the full truth would trigger yet another Trance outburst.

Having him so close made a realization dawn on her: Zidane had... *changed*.

“... Oh, wow... you’ve put on some muscle... was your hair *that* long this morning..?”

“*T-This morning..?*” the Genome stuttered, still grappling with the fact that all those months spent at Reis’s realm had felt like mere hours to the rest of

the world. “Hey, where’s Tot? He sleepin’ or somethin’?” Zidane deflected Garnet’s questions with a more important one.

“The journey has left him exhausted, poor thing. He’s taking a nap in our bedchamber,” she carefully worded the prince’s condition after his near-death experience with the anti-Burmecian insurgents. ‘Hey, guys! Glad to see you all in one piece!’ She half-joked at the Gaia One and Madeen’s crews, trying to brighten the mood, but her cheerfulness took a nosedive when she noticed the pitiful state Brahne’s magical armor was in. “F-Freya..? W-What happened to you..?”

“*Uhh...* the biggest marital dispute of all time..?” the knight nervously jested, dreading the ramifications of thrashing one of Alexandria’s national treasures.

“Oh, and we got ambushed by that Lani chick, but Freya literally knocked some sense into her. She’s on our side now,” Cinna chimed in, fresh out of the pocket dimension he seemed to disappear into whenever he was being ignored by everyone else, which happened quite often.

Garnet blinked dumbly at them for a moment as Zidane and Freya mentally cringed at the year-worth

of adventures and overlapping godly gambits they would have to explain to her.

“We’re going to need *a lot* of tea for this conversation, aren’t we..?” the queen sighed.

---

After a lengthy catching-up session with her old Mist War comrades plus Mikoto, Garnet personally showed her guests around the fortress before stopping at the entrance of the guests wing.

“Here, you may catch your breath until the assembly is about to commence. Our allies are scheduled to arrive in a few hours, so you may wash yourselves and maybe even get some sleep,” the queen explained as she distributed an assortment of keys among her friends. “Sorry if the bedchambers are a bit dusty and cramped... the staff’s quite overworked preparing everything for the Summit, and we weren’t expecting you so soon...”

“Eh, I’ve surely had worse, Your Majesty. ’Sides, I’ve already washed up this morning, thank you,” Cinna commented, eliciting a knowing snort from Marcus and Zidane.

“Uh, don’t worry ’bout us, sis” Eiko said. “Papa and I will stay at the Madeen with my crew until the call comes.”

“We’ll be supporting you at the meeting in the name of Lindblum, my dear,” Cid promised with a nod of his snowy, balding head. His magnificent mustache still defied the pull of gravity, pointy and vigorous as ever, allowing him to retain some of the regal presence that his ailing body seemed to conspire against.

“Much appreciated, Uncle Cid, Eiko. I’ll make sure fresh food and water are delivered to your ship as soon as possible,” the older Summoner replied with a grateful smile.

“Thanks, sis, you rock. See ya, guys!”

“Uh, we don’t mean to disrespect your hospitality, Garnet, but Mikoto and I will return to the Gaia One. Someone needs to keep a close eye on Lani,” Freya excused herself.

“Even if she’s in a sealed chamber, leaving her unsupervised isn’t a good idea,” Mikoto added.

“Will you two be okay by yourselves..?” the queen asked. “Wait, no, I’m not taking any risks. I’m sending my best soldiers with you...”

“That won’t be necessary, my friend. If I’m forced to fight Lani again, I’d rather have room to subdue her without others getting caught in the crossfire,” the knight answered.

None too convinced, Garnet relented, letting out a disheartened sigh. “I still can’t believe what Bishop and Ulrich have done to her... to all those innocent people... to think that history will repeat itself if we don’t garner enough support to stop them...”

“But we will,” Freya interrupted her before leaving, as her hand landed reassuringly on the queen’s shoulder. “We’ll stand together against them, like in the old days, and people will listen. We’ll make them listen.”

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**Royal Bedchamber, the Birdcage, Alexandria.**

**12:30 PM**

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“So, an Emergency Summit, huh...” Zidane sighed once he was finally alone with his wife and son, who slept soundly on the large master bed.

“Dunno why, considering all the stunts the Royal Council has pulled so far, but I still find it kinda hard to believe that they would openly support a bunch of genocidal racists just to screw us over...”

“Bishop and her associates must have been setting up this coup for decades... layers upon layers of bribes and shady alliances, everything to make Alexandria implode and crumble...” Garnet mused, folding her arms. “Mikoto’s involvement and Eiko potentially finding dirt on the Alexandrian collaborators at the smuggler hideout must have thrown a serious wrench into their plans.”

“Have our scholars already deciphered those weird papers Eiko brought back from the forest?” \*1

“Not yet. Still, they must be really close to cracking their encryption if the Council reacts so unsubtly...” the queen deducted. “They knew we’d be coming for them as soon as we had proof of their involvement in the invasion, so they’re going all out in a last-ditch attempt to seize control of the kingdom...”

An awkward silence grew between the couple as Zidane cradled Garnet’s hands and stared inquisitively into her eyes for a moment.



“... What? Is there something on my face?”

“C’mon, Dag. You already know what I’m about to ask.”

Garnet frowned, rather confused, and then her eyes widened as her face went through several shades of red.

“Seriously..? *Right now..?*” she hissed, quite annoyed at his poor timing... even if a part of her actually wouldn’t have minded blowing off some steam.

“Wait, what? *No!* I didn’t mean... I mean..! Shit, that didn’t come out right, *hahaha...*” Zidane fumbled over his words with unusual sheepishness.

Garnet chortled at the misunderstanding, and her husband joined her, albeit awkwardly. “What is it then, darling?” she asked, wiping a tear from her left eye.

The king sighed, still reluctant to confront his wife, but it had to be done.

“... We both know Mildred the Butcher *too well*, Dag. There’s no way in hell she’d let Tot off the hook completely unharmed. Besides, that’s no mere

nap; *he's barely breathing,*" he stated, gesturing at the slumbering prince. "Please... what's going on?"

Garnet folded her arms defensively, her brow dangerously furrowed.

"You'd better not be accusing me of lying about our son's health, Zidane Tribal, because I'm in no mood to deal with that kind of *crap* right now!" she exclaimed. She hated herself with a passion for withholding the truth from him and Zidane's broken voice wasn't helping matters either, but she felt she needed to remain strong for everyone's sake.

"No, no, I didn't mean it that way, honey..." the prince consort sighed, lowering his eyes as they welled up. "I... I know you're omitting stuff because you're afraid I'll Trance out and go on a rampage. Can't blame you after all I've done... but *please*... I've worked *really* hard to make sure it will never happen again. Freya can attest to it!"

The queen's lower lip trembled as her resolve wavered, and Zidane could tell a storm raged on within her heart and mind. After pondering her course of action for a moment, she sighed and reluctantly put her faith in Reis and Kuja's training.

“... Remember when I told you we fought Mildred and her followers at the castle library?” she confessed with a quivering voice. “That’s... kind of a half-truth. Our son, he... he slaughtered most of them before we arrived. Only the Butcher and Lady Kildea survived.”

The Genome stared blankly at his wife in utter shock.

“I-Is he..?”

“... Like you? No, not exactly... he’s more like... *your brother*...” Garnet replied, biting her lower lip. “I know some people can still harness the power of Black Magic despite the absence of Mist, but... he burned the rebels to a crisp single-handedly, and then finished them off with a Blizzaga spell.”

Zidane choked on his own spit.

“*W-What..? B-but... no way..!*” he stammered between coughs, craning a bewildered stare at the unconscious boy.

“I saw their still writhing bodies, Zid, impaled on ice spikes the size of pillars...” the queen recalled, her delicate visage contorted into a mournful expression.

Robbed of his usual eloquence, the king found himself unable to hold back the tears anymore. War was no longer at his doorstep; it had barged into his home and forced his child to kill in self defense, yet another tragedy he had proven utterly unable to prevent.

“I know what you’re thinking... stop right now,” Garnet said, gently holding her husband’s hands.

“But it’s true...”

“The only truth that matters is that you’ve never stopped doing your best, as a father, as a king, as a husband and friend,” the Summoner summarized with aplomb. “You are neither invincible nor infallible, just like everyone else. That’s part of being human, you know?”

Zidane uttered a disheartened chuckle.

“I ain’t human, remember?”

“Really? That’s no way to honor Vivi’s teachings, don’t you think?” Garnet retorted, cradling her husband’s face.

Vivi. They had mostly stopped using his name long ago, originally because of the sheer grief his passing brought to them, and then out of an

inexplicable sense of reverence. As if by not mentioning him, they could pretend he was on a long journey of sorts, and would one day come back to them as a grown man.

“Vivi...” Zidane sighed, slowly sinking in his chair. “Maybe the Black Mages and the Genomes are more similar than we thought...”

“Daddy..? You’re... back...” a weak little voice interrupted their conversation, causing the royal couple to exchange surprised glances, automatically forget what they were talking about, and rush to their son’s side.

Despite his otherwise simian agility, the king was so overcome with emotion that he tripped along the way and nearly fell face-first to the floor, causing Garnet’s heart to skip a beat. None the worse for wear, he picked himself up and embraced the half-conscious prince so tightly that the boy thought his ribs would crack under the pressure.

“Oh gods... I’ve missed you so bad, buddy...” Zidane blurted out, trembling uncontrollably.

“Dad... you’re crushing me...”

“Ah..! I’m sorry..!” the king gasped as he loosened his grip, suddenly understanding what

Freya was going through after receiving the mark of the gods. “You okay, son..?”

“I’m okay daddy... I missed you, too...” the prince replied with a tired smile, snuggling against his father’s chest.

“... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry... I’ll never let you down like this again...” the king hiccuped, holding the boy as if he was made of sand and could slip between his arms for good at any moment.

Grinning brightly for the first time in a while, Garnet joined in the hug with a tad too much enthusiasm, causing the whole family to collapse in a laughing heap over the ruffled sheets.

As the laughter gave way to cheerful conversation, the queen stared at her husband and child in contemplative silence, running her fingers through her son’s raven hair before reaching for Zidane’s hand. “*This is what’s at stake... this is what I must protect...*” she thought, her soul seething with grim determination. No matter who or what stood in her way, no matter the cost, she wouldn’t stop fighting until they were safe.

Until her home was safe.

## Folkváng

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Sitting on a cliff, overlooking what used to be the golden domain of Lord Berlioz alone, Gizamaluke took a moment off his ever-busy schedule to bask in the warmth of its illusive sun.

His mother's plan had succeeded; the two celestial realms were already halfway fused, and Gaia's Master Crystal's radiance had proven amply capable of sustaining Folkváng for eons to come.

He wondered if the denizens of the now-joint afterlife would have trouble co-existing, considering their vastly different outlooks and the injustices that they had been subjected to in life, but given that change is always difficult, some slight growing pains were to be expected if it meant everyone got a final shot at choosing their ultimate fate.

Besides, what's the worst they could do? *Killing* each other?

"Not gonna lie, I'm pleasantly surprised by the beauty of your father's creation," Lady Reis commented out of the blue, having made one of her infamously stealthy apparitions.

“A little too lavish for my tastes, but it will do,” Gizamaluke answered, a lopped smirk on his lips.

“Oh, you know ol’ Berlioz, always overcompensating for what he’s lost,” the goddess cheekily added. “It’s nice to see him return to his old self, though, even if he’s still quite rough around the edges.”

“Tsch... so, what now, mother? Things aren’t looking well back on Gaia...” the dragon prince asked, dead-seriously. “Bishop played Ulrich like a fiddle. She managed to pin the blame of her own actions on Burmecia to save face, and now the entire continent hates us *again*.”

“No need to fret, son. If Freya could settle a centuries-old conflict involving *your father*, then she’s more than qualified to restore the trust that Ulrich has foolishly betrayed,” Reis answered. “She will need all the help we can provide, but I’m positive she’ll succeed.”

Lord Gizamaluke smiled ever so slightly.

“The Black Mages came to me this morning, bringing some decidedly curious news,” he said, changing the subject.

“Oh? What did they say?”



“They claimed to have sensed a most unexpected presence in Alexandria. A pure, first-generation Black Mage, different from the mindless abominations that Bishop has created.”

“You don’t think..? Could it be *him*..?”

“At this point, I’m ready to believe anything,” Gizamaluke said.

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***\*1 This happened in Chapter 24 “Alone in the Dark”***

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**Author’s note:**

*Happy 4th Anniversary, The Last Cherry Blossom!*

*I can’t believe four years have already passed! Whether you’ve been following this story since the beginning, or you’ve just found it, buried and lost, if you’re reading this, thank you! You rock! :)*

*I know I’ve been absent for quite a while, but now I can finally show you why! As some of you already know, I’m an aspiring scriptwriter and*

*sound engineer, and I've been working hard with my team, Lumbra Films, on our first passion project, "Suma Zero", a short film about VR gaming and social unrest set in a cyberpunk dystopia. If you want to watch it, you can follow the Yb link in my bio!*

*We're also working on a live-action trailer for "Sicarii", a sci-fi / action mini-series about wandering warriors and aliens, duking it out in an apocalyptic wasteland. We've already released an animated teaser, so come check it out! Every view, like, comment and subscription helps us a lot!*

*Thank you for your time! See ya soon!*

## 45. The Summit (Part Two)

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*N/A: And here it is! The infamous Chapter 45, which went through an even worse development hell than Half Life 3 and changed hands for almost a year until I finally managed to complete it. Shout-out to my dear friends Josh1013 and Anti-Broadcast, who did the impossible to help me finish this Frankenstein monster of a chapter. Shout-out to the amazing Janet K. Wallace as well, who tirelessly encouraged me to finish it despite my own self-doubting. Without further ado, enjoy, Imfao*

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**April 2nd, 1820, the Birdcage, Alexandria.**

**17:00 P.M.**

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Gazing at the airships as they descended upon the hanging fortress, Garnet couldn't help but be reminded of the ravenous dragons that a desperate Kuja had stormed Gaia's combined fleets with

decades ago, as they carved a path towards Memoria.

She had called upon the main noble houses of the realm to retake the city's capital, which had fallen in the hands of the seditious royal council and its hordes. However, only five out of eight clan leaders had shown up for the war assembly.

*"The others are probably just running a bit late..."* she muttered, sarcastically. At least the numbers still favored her.

The enormous winged behemoths docked at the Birdcage's piers, each bearing its house's emblem on its sturdy steel hide. Five stern-faced lords emerged from the beasts' innards, their weapons and armor gleaming in the sun as they approached the royal couple.

Lady Seraphina was the first to pay her respects to the queen, an old ally of her family and perhaps her most devoted general after Steiner and Beatrix themselves. Lady Evangeline followed, always sharp and cunning, attentive to every gesture of her sovereigns, no matter how minuscule. Third was Lord Magnus, a rarity among the matriarchal Alexandrian clans, renowned for his talent as a military strategist, his ferocity in battle, and his

infamous lack of social graces. The greedy Lady Cedrica came fourth, always seeking profit in exchange for her loyalty. Last was the enigmatic Lady Jinn, ever the loner, hiding her allegedly mutilated visage behind a porcelain mask whose delicate, doll-like features made her presence even more unsettling.

The sound of armored boots echoed through the fortress' corridors like war drums as Garnet and her allies headed to the assembly hall. Conversation was scarce, as the kingdom's fragile situation led each clan leader to play their cards close to their chest. During that dreadful march, which felt almost eternal, Garnet only found a measure of solace in the reassuring smiles from her husband and her loyal comrades from the Mist War. She wasn't alone.

The assembly hall had once been a grand sight, evident from the intricate woodwork and exquisite wooden furniture that adorned the space. However, the help had to put in some serious effort to undo decades of neglect in the short time it took for the nobles to arrive. Everyone knew that losing Alexandria Castle had been such a massive blow to the nation's morale that Garnet had to pay attention to every detail if she wanted to garner enough support for a counterattack.

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**17:20 P.M.**

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“Ladies and gentlemen, while I assume you’re already aware of why I’ve summoned you here. I want to take this moment to go over the unfortunate recent events again, to prevent any misinformation from spreading,” said the queen, starting the meeting. Seated on chairs around a large table with a map of Alexandria on top of it, Zidane, Freya, Eiko, Cid, and the Alexandrian nobles listened in complete silence. The tension in the room was so thick that you could practically cut it with a knife.

*“Boy, this feels like a state funeral... I really hope it doesn’t turn into one...”* Zidane thought as he studied the somber faces of the guests, keeping his composure with practiced self-assurance.

“Over the last 72 hours, our capital city has come under a coordinated attack from a Trenoite task force, Burmecian smugglers, and Alexandrian collaborators. The goal was to behead our kingdom by killing off the royal family, and the culprits behind this cowardly act of war are none other than Margaret Bishop, Treno’s current ruler, and Ulrich

Fritjoffson, regent of Burmecia and murderer of its rightful king, Lord Puck,” the queen stated calmly and confidently, despite the unreadable glares she was getting from most of the nobles. Freya swallowed hard upon hearing Puck’s name, but she kept calm.

Several hands were raised among the crowd.

“Lady Seraphina?” Garnet said, giving the old warrior a chance to speak.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, but we’re talking about nothing less than regicide! Do we have any proof that Regent Fritjoffson killed Lord Puck?”

“Actually, we do. Freya Crescent, here present with us, witnessed the assassination firsthand. That’s why Ulrich has put a substantial bounty on her head,” the queen replied, gesturing toward the dragoon. “Lord Magnus?”

“How do we know she’s telling the truth?” the strategist asked, crossing his arms. “I know Lady Crescent was a key ally to us during the Mist War, but according to my sources, she’s shown erratic behavior over the past few years, culminating in the regrettable incident at the tavern last month.”

Freya clenched her teeth but held back, exchanging discreet glances with Zidane, who gestured for her to be patient.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Magnus added, pressing for a reaction. “I’m not questioning Lady Crescent’s honesty, but rather the soundness of her judgment, especially considering her... *struggles with alcohol.*”

Garnet clenched her fists, and Lady Seraphina turned her head to intervene, but it was Jinn herself who decided to speak for the first time since her arrival.

“Would you explain to us, Lord Magnus, why, if you had the resources to invade our guest’s privacy in such a way, you chose to do so *instead of watching the border with Treno?* Which, by the way, is *your responsibility,*” the masked noble said, rhythmically tapping her fingers on the arm of her seat. “Because, if the rumors are true, an entire fleet of Trenoite ships passed right through your airspace on their way to the capital as easily as a hot knife through butter... *Or did you let them in deliberately?*”

Magnus raised an eyebrow and smirked.



“Ah, Lady Jinn, I was wondering if you would grace us with the sound of your voice at some point,” he retorted, every word dripping with sarcasm. “Especially considering your territory borders Burmecea, from where, according to the queen, part of the invasion force came *completely unobstructed*. At least our fleet was outgunned and out-teched by the enemy forces, and yet we still forced them to retreat before they reached the capital. What’s your excuse?”

“*Outgunned*? Please. You were *outplayed*,” Jinn laughed humorlessly, turning away from him. “Recreants always whine about being overwhelmed when the truth is they’re simply not up to any real task. If it wasn’t for Regent Cid’s timely intervention, you wouldn’t have scored a single kill.”

“If you’re going to witlessly mock the sacrifices we’ve made, then at least have the decency to answer my question first,” Magnus replied as his expression tensed up and his icy facade began to crack.

“I would...” Jinn began, looking at him condescendingly, “But I fear the truth would be lost on one such as yourself.”

“Is no one going to question this woman’s refusal to comply with *a simple request*?” Magnus exclaimed, looking at the other nobles for support.

“*Enough!*” Garnet thundered. “Lady Jinn has an alibi, and besides, she’s been helping us better understand who the conspirators behind this plot are, and has secured solid evidence of their involvement.”

Zidane glanced at Eiko and nodded. The princess of Lindblum stood up, holding a stack of papers in her arms, and began distributing them to those present.

“These are duplicates of some of the documents we recovered from a smuggler base near the Burmecian border. They were encrypted, but we managed to decipher most of them,” she explained as she handed out the copies to the nobles. “The machines that attacked the capital were brought underground to Alexandria using *Gargants*, and originate from a clandestine military complex in the far west of Burmecia, referred to by the locals as Iron Mountain.”

Lady Jinn cleared her throat.

“After the queen contacted us following the attack on the capital, I personally led the rescue mission that cleared the monsters from the smugglers’ outpost access and extracted the survivors from the Wind Rose’s crash site,” the masked noble dispassionately added. “We descended into those caves and found what remained of their stash. Much of the material had been torched by the smugglers themselves or damaged beyond repair by the creatures that turned the place into their nest, but we found enough information to pinpoint several names and addresses.”

“*Becker... Schmidt... Wagner...*” Lady Evangeline read aloud, her brow furrowing more and more. “These surnames... it’s hard to believe, and yet it doesn’t surprise me...”

“Indeed, three of Alexandria’s patrician families are involved in trafficking golems from Burmecia to our kingdom’s capital, which were activated during the invasion attempt,” Garnet explained.

“We all knew the Beckers or the Schmidts were one step away from siding with Treno against the crown. This only confirms our suspicions,” Lady Jinn stated. “Even if Lord Magnus *could* use some manners, I must admit that he’s right on one thing;

my ignorance of the existence of those tunnels has costed us way too many Alexandrian lives, and to make up for it, I've unconditionally put all of my clan's resources at Her Majesty's disposition."

"*Finally*, some self-criticism!" Magnus commented, causing Seraphina to shoot a downright murderous glare his way.

"For the last time, *boy*, you will watch your tone in front of the queen, or *I'll make you shut up*," she growled, wrapping her fist around the hilt of her arming sword.

"Oh, don't misunderstand me, milady," the tactician nonchalantly responded. "I'm more than willing to throw my support behind this cause... as long as an example is made of those *collaborateurs*."

"Much as I hate to admit it, I agree with Magnus on that last point, Your Majesty..." Evangeline supported the motion with a stern gesture. "We've shown these traitors mercy in the past, and look how they've repaid us."

The queen drew a deep breath, steeling herself to make a promise she dreaded, one from which she knew there would be no turning back.

“I know. Those who willingly collaborated with the enemy, regardless of their origin or station, will be judged and executed for high treason according to the laws of this kingdom,” she declared, and the room filled with murmurs of approval.

“What about these... *war machines*?” Cedrica greedily asked. “There’s a rumor they can be controlled...”

“Those machines you speak of *are alive*,” Zidane intercepted the question, producing the heart of one of the automatons that had attacked Alexandria. “Behold, the power core that fueled one of them. What lies at its center is one of the foulest war crimes this nation has ever witnessed; *a living soul*, crystallized and in perpetual agony, forcibly ripped from a sentient being and compelled to murder against its will.”

Lady Evangeline gasped in horror, while Cedrica had to fight the urge to vomit. Seraphina, Magnus and Jinn maintained their composure, although their body language betrayed how disturbed they were by the existence of *such an artifact*.

“Your Majesty... *how... how do you know all of this?*” Lady Evangeline asked, still in shock.

“Because the Burmecian secret service, the Jäggers, have split up, and a faction loyal to Freya Crescent raided one of the warehouses where these war machines were being stored before the invasion,” Garnet explained. “They were instrumental in alerting us to Ulrich and Bishop’s plans, and the intel they provided played a pivotal role in thwarting their attack on the capital.”

The room buzzed with murmurs again.

“*Lady Crescent...*” Magnus’s voice rose above the ruckus, causing an immediate hush. “In light of this new information, I believe an apology for my earlier rudeness is in order. Your aid in safeguarding our kingdom is... much appreciated.”

“*Finally... some self-criticism,*” muttered Jinn under her breath, barely loud enough for Magnus to hear her, though this time he didn’t take the bait.

While Freya remained angry about the clan leader’s initial accusations, and she didn’t want to take credit for Mikoto’s actions (despite the scientist’s preference for anonymity), she knew that the most conducive path to the salvation of both kingdoms was to forge alliances wherever possible, so she accepted the apology with a courteous nod.

“*Very well.* Given that the situation is far more complex and delicate than we imagined, and that Ulrich and Bishop’s technology represents a threat not only to our kingdom, *but to sentient life at large*, I believe I speak for everyone here when I ask what your orders are, Your Majesty,” Lady Seraphina said with conviction, and none of the other nobles objected to her statement, reigniting the hope in the Alexandrian queen’s heart.

“The Regency of Lindblum stands behind your cause, Queen Garnet,” Cid announced, taking the nobles aback; they hadn’t anticipated direct involvement from another nation in the impending battle. “The distinguished 4th aerial division, pride of our fleet, is ready to offer you assistance.”

The royal couple smirked ever so lightly; against all odds, *their plan was working.*

“Right now, a turf war is being fought in the streets of the capital. The rebels aim to blockade the city, likely to stall for their allies’ arrival, but our loyal troops are doing their best to hamper their efforts,” Zidane explained, gesturing at the map of the kingdom upon the central table.

“They’re facing overwhelming odds, cut off and spread thin. Without immediate reinforcements,

they'll be overwhelmed soon. As much as I despise the idea of engaging our enemies in such a crowded area, we can't let them gain a stable foothold in the city." Garnet added, moving the miniatures representing their combined forces atop the map like a chess master performing her play. "We will march into the capital with overwhelming force at once, and this is how we will do it."

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## 20:30

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After the assembly died down, the clan leaders scattered into the winds aboard their airships, heading to their respective lands. Some would lead their forces to the kingdom's borders to halt the enemy's advance, while others would march at dawn with their troops toward the kingdom's capital to subdue the insurgents. The chessboard was set; *nothing remained but to win the game.*

After bidding the nobles farewell, Garnet decided to talk to Freya in private, especially after the altercation with Magnus. She found her in her cabin



aboard the Gaia One, readying her gear for the battle to come.

“May I come in?” she asked, knocking softly on the already open hatch door.

“*Garnet!* Of course, sure,” the surprised dragoon replied, placing the Dragon Hair against a wall. “How can I help you?”

Garnet took a chair and sat down in tense silence. Freya followed suit.

“Freya... I know you won’t like this, but I’m here to ask you to leave for Burmecia tonight.”

The knight blinked dumbly at Garnet for a moment.

“*You what...?*”

“You heard correctly. Amarant has sent us a coded message from Burmecia through our undercover agents in Melda Arch. The Partisans will attack Iron Mountain in two days,” explained the queen. “They plan to publicly expose whatever they find there. The confusion will give you the perfect opening to challenge Ulrich.”

“*Let me get this straight...* you’re asking me to *abandon you* in your time of greatest need... even

though I owe you my life several times over,” the dragon knight interrupted her.

“No, I’m asking you to save not only Burmecia, *but the entire continent*, now that you have a real chance to do so,” responded Garnet firmly. “We both know that tomorrow, among the ranks of the rebels, there will be several Burmecians still loyal to Ulrich. If you stain your hands with their blood, discrediting him will be much harder, even with the support of the Gods.”

“But... what will happen with Lani if I leave now?” Freya asked. “Not to boast, but her Magitek augmentations have made her utterly unstoppable. If something were to happen, and I were away...”

“I’ve already spoken with Mikoto. She will take her to her lab at the Black Mage Village tonight. If someone finds Lani here, I won’t be able to save her from the gallows,” stated the queen without hesitation. “You will leave with Eiko for Burmecia in two hours, where you will meet up with Brynhild. She will take you to the Partisans’ base.”

“But, Garnet, what if for some reason Zidane loses control again?” Freya insisted. “I’ve seen him in action, and his powers have already surpassed Kuja’s! The only other thing that could stop him

right now is an Eidolon, *and not without a ton of collateral damage.*”

“Freya, *please...* do it for Puck, for Wulfweard, for Haagen, for all the lives those bastards destroyed to amass their power,” Garnet kept pushing as her eyes welled up; Lady Jinn had just told her in private that most of the Wind Rose’s crew had perished in the explosion, including the faithful Pluto Knight who was nearing his retirement when the bomb detonated aboard the doomed airship.

The names of the dead cut Freya deeper than any blade. She looked away, crossed her arms, and took a deep breath.

“... I’ll come back with help as soon as I can. You have my word, old friend,” she finally promised after a moment of silent contemplation.

“No one else on this continent could broker true peace between our peoples. *I know you will,*” the queen replied gently, taking her friend’s hands in hers.

Freya shuddered as she felt the toll that Ulrich’s attempt on her life had taken on the queen’s once immaculate skin. The sensation brought back to her mind the conversation they had had over tea just a

few weeks ago. Garnet had asked her if she had what it took to lead a kingdom, and she had responded by showing the queen her scars. Now that they both shared that as well, she realized how childish her response had been at that moment; *the scars that would truly prove her mettle were the ones that would come next.*

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In the depths of the fortress, two silent figures, barely illuminated by oil lamps, spent their time in blissful ignorance while outside, the drums of war already roared deafeningly for those who could hear them. Suddenly, the room lit up as the door opened, and a third silhouette awkwardly joined the scene.

“Adelbert..?” the newcomer asked, and the Pluto Knight, who was still lying unconscious with Beatrix by his bedside, woke from his tumultuous dream upon hearing the king’s voice.

“Zidane..? *Is that you..?*” he inquired, making a great effort to sit up.

“Calm down, love... *slowly,*” Beatrix hastened to assist her husband, who had come dreadfully close to ending up paralyzed for life when Zidane broke his spine in the castle tower.

“Where are we..? What happened..?” the knight asked, completely disoriented.

“We’re in the Birdcage, Rusty,” the Genome somberly stated. “Garnet and Bea brought you here after... you know.”

Steiner squinted as he reminisced. The brutal confrontation with a Tranced-out Zidane soon emerged from among his memories.

“Yes... *now I remember,*” he said with a surprising amount of restraint given the torrent of conflicting emotions and challenging questions raging within his chest. “How long have I been out?”

“A day,” Beatrix replied, stroking his tousled hair.

“Was anyone else injured in the fight?”

“No. Only you,” Zidane replied, increasingly crestfallen. “It’s a long story, but... while you were recovering, Freya found a way to cure my... *condition.* It will never happen again.”

Steiner raised both eyebrows, feeling that there was something even more *suspicious* about Zidane’s story than its miraculous resolution.

“Wait a moment... did you just mention *the Birdcage?!* ” the knight blurted out, finally realizing what had been bugging him all along. “*Why are we here?!* ”

Zidane sighed.

“Bishop’s forces attacked the castle again. It wasn’t safe for any of us to be there anymore,” he responded, knowing that the knight would be furious once he found out that his answer barely qualified as a half-truth.

“*What do you mean they attacked the castle?! Is everyone okay?!* ” Steiner erupted, trying to get out of bed, although he immediately gave up as a brutal surge of pain knocked him flat on his back.

“Adelbert, *please*, take it easy!” Beatrix insisted, gently taking his hand to help him calm down. “You can’t make any sudden movements yet.”

Zidane rubbed his face with his hand, deeply ashamed of the consequences of his weakness.

“Rusty, listen... I know I’ve let you down. I’ve let everyone down. You have no idea how sorry I am,” apologized the king, kneeling by Steiner’s bedside with a respect and reverence that he rarely showed to anyone. “... But this time, *I mean it when*

*I say I'm cured, and I'm going to use this new lease on life to make things right."*

After pondering his words for a moment, Steiner's stern face gradually softened, and trading an unusual gesture for another, he gently patted the shoulder of the man who had given him the chance to serve a truly righteous king.

"Please, rise, Your Majesty," said the knight, halfway between sincerity and harmless mockery. "Leave the floor for those who deserve to be prostrate."

Zidane looked up, and as he rose to his feet, his lips curled into his signature goofy grin.

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**23:30**

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A cool breeze drifted through the evening, blowing Garnet's loose hair over her face and causing it to stick to her damp cheeks. It was a cool night; she normally might have even found it cold, but she barely noticed. Instead, with a steadying breath, she gently brushed the ebony strands away

from her eyes and looked up at the sky. War was not unfamiliar to her by any means, but *leading an army into her beloved home city?* Slaughtering fellow Alexandrians, no matter how traitorous they were? *Could she even do this?*

She clenched her fists against the railing and shook her head. This wasn't the time to wallow in self-pity; she had to be strong. Everything and everyone was counting on her being strong, so *she had no choice but to bear it.*

"There you are," Zidane spoke softly, chuckling as Garnet jumped slightly. "You know, I still think you could have made an excellent thief because you weren't easy to track down. I wonder if anyone else knows how to access this room."

Despite herself and all the stress she was dealing with, Garnet found herself holding back an incredulous laugh. "Is that so?"

"Yup," he answered, joining her at the railing and looking at her with a small grin. "By the way, good job getting those rear-echelon motherfuckers to cooperate. We should add '*Bureaucrat Tamer*' to your already impressive list of titles."



Garnet smiled through teary eyes. “How do you always manage to do that?” she asked, still not turning towards him.

“You mean coming up with shitty jokes?”

“No; always finding something positive about our current situation. Even when all seems lost, you still don’t let it get to you... and here I am...” Garnet sighed, staring into the pitch black horizon. “I’m supposed to keep it together when things go to shit. Instead, I’m out here falling apart. I..” she trailed off as Zidane moved closer and pulled her into an embrace.

“Do you really think I’m *that* blindly optimistic?” He asked, catching her off guard.

The queen looked up at him and met his stone-cold gaze. She was taken aback; she had expected to find him smiling as he almost always did. Instead, she was met with one of the most jarringly serious expressions she had ever seen on his face. “Zidane..?”

“Do you really think I’m stronger than you?” He pressed on.

“Well, I—”

Zidane didn't let her answer this time.

"The truth is, you're stronger than I'll ever be. That became quite clear to me during these last few months," he added, piercing her soul with his icy blue eyes. "Yeah, sometimes I can keep it together when things get real bad, but without you I can barely do anything meaningful most of the time."

Garnet broke the embrace.

"Come on... we both know that's not true, *you shameless flatterer*," she dismissed his claims with a wry chuckle.

"Hey... just because you need someone to lean on from time to time doesn't change the fact you're the strongest woman I've ever met," Zidane added, leaning on the railing next to her. "Maybe you can't do it all on your own, but you don't have to. That's what your friends are for. That's what *I'm* for."

Garnet remained silent for a moment, her fractured porcelain visage twisted into a tense scowl.

"This is not a matter of simple strength, Zid! I've done things as a queen that I'm not proud of, but *this*... I don't even know if we're doing the right thing!"

“Yes, but unfortunately, it has to be done,” the king stated. “The enemy is no longer at the gates but in our own house, kidnapping our family to turn them into mechanical monsters. We’ll have to carry this burden for the rest of our lives, but we can’t shirk the responsibility of stopping them before they raze the whole continent to the ground.”

“This is *my* burden to bear, Zidane, not yours. You don’t have to do this,” said Garnet, clenching her jaw to hold back the tears. “This is gonna be the battle of Zamo Basin all over again. I almost lost you back then; *I’m not letting that happen again.*”

Her husband smiled.

“Look... pretty much all the good things I’ve ever accomplished were all because you were there for me, so let me be here for you now,” he said as he gently grabbed her arms, and this time, the queen didn’t try to push away, her breathing shallow as he stayed locked in her gaze. “Dagger... I love you... and I—”

The rest of what he might have said was forgotten as her lips crashed into his. The kiss lingered, quickly growing more intense until finally they broke for air. As he met her gaze once again, it

became obvious that his hunger and yearning for her were rivaled only by hers.

Not wasting any time, he locked lips with her again.

Losing control, he pushed her against the stone wall, more roughly than he had intended, but the queen didn't let up for even an instant. He planted a row of kisses down her neck as she frantically pulled at his belt, and he returned the favor by giving a few quick tugs to her dress until it ended up hanging loosely around her midriff.

With most of their clothes out of the way, the lovers melted into an undulating swirl of pleasure, losing themselves fully in each other.

*"Gods, how I've missed you..."* Zidane whispered as he began to pick up his pace.

Garnet gasped in response, moving her hips in time with his as he drove into her.

*"Show me..!"* she panted, digging her nails into his back.

With a devilish grin, he lifted her away from the wall and fully into his arms. *"Was that a challenge?"* He breathed, maneuvering her inside

and throwing her on an antique bed before climbing back on top of her.

“*No. it’s an order from your queen,*” She retorted with a savage grin, her hair fanning out like a dark halo.

No one slept that night in Alexandria.

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